

Mosoms and Moccasins . . . Literacy in an Indigenous Context

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Abstract

In this paper Dr. Trudy Cardinal shares stories of her experiences teaching literacy for 13 years in an Elementary classroom and the shifts that she made in her thinking about literacy in an Indigenous context. She draws on work she was engaged in as a professor in Elementary education where she came alongside undergraduate students to create experiences that encouraged a coming together, in conversation, to begin thinking about what was done in classrooms to nurture literacy learning of all students, but especially for the youngest literacy learners.

Introduction

As a Cree/Métis assistant professor in the area of Elementary Education I occasionally get invited to speak about my experiences as an educator or my research (narrative inquiry, identity, and Aboriginal youth) and so it was not unusual when Dr. Dwayne Donald mentioned that he had been invited to speak at the *Centre High Indigenous Literacy Event*, and wanted to put my name forward to Naim Cardinal and the Centre High Indigenous Student Leadership youth, to speak alongside of him and the other invited speaker, Indigenous author Aaron Paquette. He mentioned the event to me in the midst of a lunch that was being held for a few grandmothers and an Elder who were visiting the university campus for the experiential part of a course that is offered. I was having some trouble concentrating on what Dwayne was talking about in that moment because the little room was filled with smiles and laughter and conversation, not to mention stew and bannock, as well as one tiny, little Kokom¹ with beautiful braids who had just arrived and her funny stories had me captivated. It was such a joy to have Kokoms speaking Cree and telling stories on the university campus. This had never been part of my undergraduate university experience. In the midst of all of this, there was Dwayne saying words like *Naim* and *literacy* and *Centre High* and I said yes without really knowing what I had agreed to. We decided we would talk about the details later. My answer of yes without knowing the details came from a place of relationship. I trusted Dwayne and I knew the kinds of talks and conversations he had been part of and I had always gravitated towards those kinds of conversations. I knew about Naim from stories that were told about him in the Edmonton community and about the good things he had done. The stories that held the most weight for me were from the youth that I had worked alongside of in different research projects who spoke highly of him whenever he had crossed their paths. And so in that moment, when we had time only to say *Naim* and

¹ Kokom is how you say grandmother in the Cree Language. There are a number of ways to spell Kohkom. I choose to use the spelling Kokom as that is the spelling my daughter and granddaughter use when referring to me as a grandmother.

literacy and *Centre High*, I based my immediate agreement on these stories of relationships.

The sharing of my coming to the event that inspired this paper is significant because I realized, as I contemplated this request later, the literacy understanding I held as an elementary school classroom teacher had shifted. I had learned in my 13 years in the elementary classroom to break literacy down into teeny, tiny parts—emphasizing reading and writing, spelling and grammar²—all geared towards helping students be successful on standardized literacy assessment. During those times, literacy wasn't about conversation or relationships or stories, at least not in the ways that I had come to know. As I recall my initial response I note that I lived what I understood and that was that literacy is about conversations, relationships, and stories.

What Knowledge Counts?

Until this request came forward, the majority of the talks that I had been part of attended to the concept of identity—of who we are and are becoming as Indigenous Peoples—and my stories to live by (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999) and how it was that I had come to know these stories. This searching for coherence, for a story that hangs together (Carr, 1986), was also something I considered as I thought about literacy in an Indigenous context because after I found myself in the current, being swept away on route to Center High's Literacy Event, the words of Indigenous author Thomas King (2003) popped into my mind. Just as someone had once looked at him, not seeing what they expected, I imagined that I might stand before the Centre High youth, and the larger audience, and have everyone look at me saying, "You're not the Indian I had in mind" (King, 2003, p. 43). I feared that I might not share stories of literacy in the way that they might have hoped. As I contemplated the concept of literacy in an Indigenous context or from an Indigenous perspective I noted this urge to silence my own knowing. Once I realized I might not be the literacy-knowing Indigenous educator that some might have had in mind I had an overwhelming desire: to squelch the stories that I knew from my experiences growing up as a Cree/Métis literacy learner; to silence the knowledge I carried from my 13 years of teaching young literacy learners; and to ignore the understandings I had come to from my teaching pre-service teachers, future teachers of the young learners. When I experience this kind of tension I turn to academic experts in the field of research and I seek out the written word to articulate knowing about literacy. And so as I contemplated what I might say for the event, I imagined sharing literature about literacy in an Indigenous context from the literacy-knowing scholars that I had in mind (Fettes, 2013; Peltier, 2010; Sterzuk, 2008; Toulouse, 2013). But I didn't. I weave in this story because this too is important to know in thinking about literacy in an Indigenous context. It is important to think about the ways we know and the ways we share this knowing and the kinds of knowledge we might validate or disregard.

² In my experiences as an educator I note that while the Alberta Education English Language Arts program of studies is designed to have the general outcomes be achieved through a variety of listening, speaking, reading, writing, viewing, and representing experiences, the standardized tests are designed to measure success tending to emphasize reading, writing, spelling and grammar in ways that can be measured easily.

Experiences of a Teacher Educator

At the time of the talk in December of 2014, since completing my doctorate in November of 2013, I had taught three undergraduate courses with a language and literacy focus for the Elementary Education program at the University of Alberta. In each of those courses I had asked my students to tell me about their first literacy experiences on their “early landscapes” (Greene, 1995, p. 73) because I believe that stories of experiences shape the way we understand and think about literacy. This task was often more difficult than one would imagine. Sometimes it was because the stories were hard ones that brought back memories of struggle, frustration, and feeling very silenced. Sometimes it was because the memories were great, stories of being read to every night with literature throughout the house and parents invested in the reading and writing skills of their young children. But always, by this stage of the game—the university years—the students looked at me with a bit of panic as I asked them to write so that I could *hear* them. They didn’t understand what I meant. Sometimes I wasn’t sure I understood what I meant, but I do know that I had an intuitive sense that I couldn’t hear them, that they were writing stories and responses that they thought I wanted to hear while I was seeking to *hear* them, their voice, their stories, and their knowing. I wondered then, and I wonder now, where it is that we—my students and I—lost our ability to trust our stories and to trust our knowing.

The evening of the talk, I stood before the audience feeling as if it was my debut public talk about literacy from my Cree/Métis perspective. I knew that as a Kokom, mom, aunty, teacher, and now teacher educator I had been thinking about literacy from my Cree/Métis perspective my whole life. I had also been thinking about how my early landscape stories of literacy didn’t always line up with the stories of literacy that educators seemed to covet. The grand narrative of literacy learning is often one of being nurtured by parents snuggling children reading books each night. And as I considered this narrative I felt a niggling sense of unease as I looked to my own childhood and realized that no one read to me when I went to bed and yet somehow I was the quintessential, nose in book, living in the library kind of child, and I still am. And I wondered how many other literacy learners didn’t have that experience of family reading to them like in the movies or in the storybooks. I cringe a little now as I look back to my early teaching years and I think about the homework routine that I created. I knew better, from my own experience, and yet somehow I insisted that it would only be those children who read every night with their family, signing the little log book, who could be successful as literacy learners. I am not saying that those experiences are not wonderful—relationships being formed in the snuggles, conversations being held in the midst of the reading, and stories of experience being created to be retold in undergraduate classes. But what I am trying to ask, in this roundabout way, is what stories of literacy learning have I, and the undergraduate students in my education courses, silenced and which have we privileged and what might we learn from returning to those early landscapes and retelling stories that we had once disregarded?

When I said yes to speaking about literacy in an Indigenous context, many stories flooded back filling me with memories. Yet I was reluctant to bring them forward to the literacy event. I felt that perhaps they wouldn’t be the literacy stories people had in mind. In the end I was compelled to share them anyway. I felt that I was supposed to share them

because they were there—my stories of experience as a literacy learner, the stories that once I had disregarded as not academic enough to bring to university courses.

I had come to understand over the three courses I taught as a teacher educator, and a lifetime of wonders, that literacy is about how we make sense of the world and who we are and are becoming in it. Literacy is about stories: stories we tell; stories we hear; and stories we come to live by, to retell, and relive again and again. But once, as a young and uncertain teacher who was beginning, I broke literacy apart into teeny, tiny sections called reading, writing, grammar, and spelling. Now, teaching undergraduate courses, I try to attend to those many, many parts while striving to honor inner knowing—my inner knowing—and to hear the voices and the inner knowing that my students bring into the classroom.

I don't disregard best practice or great pedagogy or the need for understanding curriculum as planned and curriculum as lived (Aoki, 2005), but I have to come to know that I need to recognize and acknowledge experience and stories because that is what literacy in an Indigenous context means to me. While research articles validated much of this knowing, I know that this inner understanding came to me in relationships, in conversations, and through the experiences I lived alongside of those who helped me make sense of the world.

Mosom Stories

One of the first stories I thought of for literacy in an Indigenous context was the memory of my Mosom.³ He came to me once in a dream, speaking only Cree as he did in life, and taught me how to make one of those fur trapper hats with the flaps that come down and cover the ears. I don't understand very much Cree and so even in the dream I sort of nodded, smiled, and laughed as I do when I don't quite understand. But he was persistent and with the help of drawings of what he wanted me to do I understood. I was to sew and make a fur trapper's felt hat. I woke up that night and drew the pattern of the hat he wanted me to make in that dream although I never did make it.

This dream reminded me of forgotten memories of how he really did teach me as I was growing up, even though we did not speak the same language. For a time my mom and siblings and I lived with him in his cabin during my childhood. We had no running water, no power, and no heat so using a wood stove and coal oil lamp was how we managed. I have a memory of one particular morning when we were gathered at the kitchen table eating instant porridge. On the packages of instant porridge were pictures of animals. I remember my Mosom saying something in Cree, pointing at the image on the porridge package. I nodded, smiled, and laughed as I do when I do not understand, hoping he would quit talking before he realized that I had no idea what he was saying. But he persisted. I think my big sister caught on first and started repeating after him. I followed suit and so we, over breakfast, learned a few Cree words, learned to name some of the animals on the instant porridge package. What I didn't realize at the time, or even after that dream, what I didn't realize until this talk, was that this was an example of my early landscape stories (Greene, 1995) of literacy. This was literacy in an Indigenous Context, yet this was a story that never made it into my own writing or into my course

³ Mosom is the word for grandfather in the Cree Language.

planning. Even as I shared this story with my sister in preparation for this talk, I heard the hesitation in her voice about how it might be received. I kept it in anyway because if I was going to ask my undergraduate students to share their early landscape literacy stories then I should do the same. I understand the vulnerability of sharing our stories and this too is what literacy means to me—sharing stories and vulnerability.

Stories of Moccasins

Just about a week before the literacy event I dreamt again of my Mosom. This time he was being honored. There was a healing Sundance⁴ being held for him and his family in this dream. I was not raised to know the spiritual traditions of my Cree ancestors. My Mosom didn't indicate to us that he had any of this spiritual knowing or if he did, he did so in Cree and I didn't understand. I only know of these kinds of spiritual ceremonies through my work alongside Elders as an adult. And yet, in this dream my Mosom was being honored in this way. There I was, with my daughter, granddaughter, and my siblings in my dream. As we gathered, my sister noted that we were all in need of new moccasins. The ones we were wearing looked awkward and didn't fit. In this dream I knew things were good. I knew that as a family we were healing but I still felt like I wasn't the Indian I had in mind because my moccasins didn't fit. When I have these kinds of dreams I immediately talk to my sister, as I have done our whole lives, because while I didn't acknowledge it in my scholarly work, I have intuitively known that dreams are how I make sense of my world and who I am and am becoming. For me, dreams are part of literacy in my Cree/Métis context. And yet, I have never, as a teacher, a learner, or a professor, created any spaces where dreams might be welcomed.

So I filed that Mosom dream away, thinking it was interesting but over. Then, just a few nights before I gave the talk about literacy in an Indigenous context, I dreamt of cousins visiting me, my Mosom's other grandchildren. In this new dream I was telling them about the moccasins that didn't fit in my other dream. They looked at me, looked at my moccasins and said, "but they do." I looked down at my feet, in my dream, and I realized that they did, they really did fit. I realized that once again my Mosom was probably telling me something. He was telling me that the moccasins do fit. These stories, these dreams, are not the literacy I teach from the required textbook for the courses I teach about language arts and literacy, and yet they are literacy. So while I was full of angst, trying to negotiate which stories needed to be told for this talk, my Mosom and some of my cousins came to me in a dream to tell me that there was no need to worry; that I should tell the stories that showed up. They reassured me that somewhere in the audience there would be someone who would *hear* the story in the way that it needed to be heard and that this too, this sharing of stories of dreams, is literacy.

So now, while I still urge the pre-service teachers in my courses to learn about so-called best practice and to investigate good pedagogy, and to create a list of the current reading and writing strategies, I seek mostly to understand, to *hear*, their stories of literacy. I strive to use good children's literature to gently encourage the sharing of stories of literacy and I seek ways to care for them, to honor them, to hear them in ways that aren't always possible.

⁴ The Sundance is a traditional ceremony practiced of several North American Indigenous Peoples.

Literacy in an Indigenous Context

My Mosom and I were not close. My story of him barely existed because I couldn't understand him. I couldn't have a conversation with him, not then when he lived and not now in my dreams of him. He spoke Cree and I understood (and still understand) very little. He was away or I was away and so my stories of him seemed small. It seemed like he and his stories belonged to my sister who tried harder to speak in Cree to him; or to my mom, a fluent Cree speaker; or even to my cousins who were closer to him. I have stories of my paternal grandma who spoke English to me, told me I would grow up to be queen, and to value schooling. I have stories of aunties who helped raise me and who read and wrote and finished their own education, telling me to value schooling. But I didn't have stories of my Mosom until I was ready to hear them, until they started to come to me in dreams and in memories, until I started to tell those stories too.

I understand now that stories that I think of as silenced, as voices that I cannot hear, might be just waiting for the right time to come forward. Maybe they are waiting until the grandmothers lure them to a gathering with the scent of stew and bannock, where a trusted colleague might be waiting to entice them with stories of Indigenous youth leadership, literacy, and Indigenous authors. I might never be the Indigenous educator who understands literacy in the ways you might have imagined, or the ways you might have hoped. I always take the long way, where I smile, nod, and laugh because I don't understand. But I do know that Literacy in an Indigenous context includes building and sustaining relationships, engaging in conversations, and telling and hearing stories of the ways we make sense of the world.

I end with the story of me, as I go back to my course planning where I take up those teeny, tiny, little pieces of literacy that I broke apart as I silenced stories of Mosoms and moccasins to become really good at stories of pedagogy and curriculum. I will continue to dream up a new story, possibly a story that starts with a Mosom, along with the grandmothers, teaching me to listen with more than my ears (Archibald, 2008, p. 8),⁵ and then I just might hear the voices of my undergraduate students in ways that will help them to hear the stories of their youngest literacy learners. And then, maybe someday I will share another talk and tell a different story of literacy in an Indigenous context.

⁵ Archibald (2008) speaks of learning to listen “with three ears: two on the sides of [my] head and the one that is in [my] heart” (p. 8).

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