

Landscapes of Literacy: The Challenges of Reading Cree-English Dual Language Picture Books as a Decolonizing Strategy

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Abstract

The article theorizes the possibilities of a decolonizing methodology in a reading of David Bouchard's Cree-English dual language picture books *Nokum is My Teacher* and *The Drum Calls Softly*. Paulo Freire's (1971) call to educators to become teacher-learners and Luis Urrieta Jr.'s (2007) concept of *figured worlds* as they relate to forms of identity work to inform the reading. The article suggests that not only can dual language picture books be read as social documents, but also that reading these texts as a decolonizing strategy provides opportunity for dialogic engagement across cultural boundaries.

Keywords: Cree; education; decolonizing pedagogy; dual language texts; picture books; language revitalization



Landscapes of Literacy: The Challenges of Reading Cree-English Dual Language Picture Books as a Decolonizing Strategy

When I accepted a teaching post in a remote Cree community, I had no idea how much the experience and my subsequent introduction to narrative inquiry would affect my pedagogy. In the search to expand my reading practice and teaching resources, I began to explore texts that represent Cree cultures and in so doing discovered dual language picture books. Dual language picture books are texts for (young) children, with illustrations in a variety of art forms, and with a single narrative in two languages—often with English and Aboriginal languages forming parallel narratives. When I realized that dual language picture books could be employed as part of a decolonizing methodology, I recognized my need for help and I began looking for the necessary supports to interpret both the illustrations and dual language narrative streams. In the process of learning how to read these texts, I began to understand how students who see their culture being enacted in the classroom context, who are thus in possession of additional cultural capital, interact more easily with teachers like me (a White teacher) because the notion of dualities between their home and school lives for them does not exist (Bourdieu, 1973; De Graaf, De Graaf, & Kraaycamp, 2000; RCAP, 1996).

While I had always seen my own cultural history reflected in my school curricula, I discovered that some students have to negotiate cultural discontinuity daily (Kanu, 2006). It follows that affirming children's first language and culture in the classroom helps not only to affirm their identity but also to support their academic achievement (August & Shanahan, 2006; Cummins, 2001; Cummins, Brown, & Sayers, 2007), to validate their language and culture, and to scaffold their efforts to achieve the forms of academic English that underpin success in postsecondary institutions. There are a number of studies on the value and challenges of encouraging readers to expand literacy through bilingual and multicultural texts (Black, 2008; Burke & Peterson, 2007; Hammett & Bainbridge, 2009; Kiefer, 1988; Laman, 2006; Maagero & Ostbye, 2012; Morgan, 2009; Meyerson, 2006; Prasad, 2013; Reese, 2007; Westby, Moore, & Roman, 2002). After my own experiences in Northern schools, I have come to understand that an approach to the learning process that values and engages with students' home language and culture can be transformative and this occurs most effectively when it involves the school's larger community wherever possible. Through interacting with community members as a visiting educator, I began to see alternative ways of viewing and interacting with the world. As I began to search for different forms of resources, I first searched for Cree-English texts because I had formed strong relationships with the Cree community in which I had taught and had enjoyed my rudimentary language lessons with them. I sought published texts that could be easily found through mainstream retailers because I had become conscious of the challenges of accessing materials, educational and otherwise, when one is in a remote community. With those needs in mind, I found David Bouchard's work. In this article, I will refer specifically to *Nokum is My Teacher* and *The Drum Calls Softly*. I chose these texts because they engage explicitly with the importance of family and community connection in negotiating cultural discontinuity and also because they include an audio CD, which not only allow readers to hear the text being read aloud accurately, but also have the added frame of Cree singing and drumming.

In Seeking a Decolonizing Methodology

Luis Urrieta Jr.'s (2007) concept of *figured worlds* and its connection to the ongoing process of negotiating one's identity informs this article. My personal sense of identity and sense of the world(s) in which I live irrevocably shifted during my experiences in the North. Indeed, this shifting of subjectivity is a fluid and ongoing process. My introduction to Cree culture began with social relationships and community building as an educator unfamiliar with the culture and I seek to continue learning through collaborative research in postsecondary contexts. The friendships I gained continue to illuminate the similarities and differences in our perspectives. These interactions also made real for me Paulo Freire's (1971) call to educators to become teacher-learners. In seeking to be a teacher-learner, I began to recognize how reading and interpretation of texts occurs from the site of one's own perspectives and experiences and that, inescapably, this site is ever shifting. This paper, which seeks to negotiate reading practice as a decolonizing pedagogical methodology, also seeks to respond to Findlay's (2000) call to "Always Indigenize" (p. 28).

Dual language picture books by design offer a decolonizing strategy in which the authors and illustrators reframe and restructure the picture book in order to make it more reflective of their own culture, thereby drawing overt attention to interpretation. Systemic practices around textual interpretation, those which occur in educational settings, value textual complexity, figurative devices, and linguistic intricacy. These elements may or may not be present in dual language texts. Instead, such texts may offer insights into cultural values and practices and other forms of truths in narrative form. Willie Ermine (1995), in his articulation of Aboriginal epistemology, argues subjectivity determines authenticity. Acknowledging the subjective positioning from which one seeks insights—here the forms or layers of meaning in a literary text—helps one to articulate more fully how one arrives at one's interpretations. Dual language picture books may appear simple in their code switching practices (where the speaker/author moves fluidly between languages) (Gumperz, 1972) and in their narrative; however, these texts offer a form of literacy that can not only be taught to younger students, but also can provide a focus for study for older learners. Having worked with learners at several levels of their educational journeys, and having been influenced by the interactions that come with teaching within different cultural communities, I am learning to understand more the implicit values of my own culture and educational experiences. Depending on where one lives, amongst other factors, it must be noted, the opportunity (or limits thereof) to interact with other cultural groups affects one's ability to identify, problematize, and explore one's subjectivities in relation to a text.

Reading the Text

After I had taught on a remote Cree reserve, the notion that my background and life experiences inform my perceptions resonated with me (Greene, 1978). I recognized that I would require help interpreting dual language picture books just as I do when an Aboriginal language appears in literature intended for older readers. Dual language picture books present narratives that can help those seeking to be teacher-learners to reflect the cultural reality of the classroom or, for those who might teach in more homogenous settings, help students examine their own interpretive stances by disrupting

their positioning. Because reading is, after all, a subjective experience, dual language picture books provide an opportunity through which one can explore the implications of reading practices based in one's own socio-cultural positioning. This form of interpretive practice also provides a real example of Wiltse's (2001) suggestion that students (like their educators, arguably) must negotiate their meaning-making processes through the lens of multiple identities.

Creating Opportunity for Dialogue Through Text

In seeking to employ a decolonizing methodology, dialogue is a necessary pedagogical element. I seek to ground my own pedagogy in a dialogic approach for which hooks (1988) argues. Dialogue may mean addressing overt messages in dual language picture books or it may mean teasing out implicit elements of the text with students in order to better understand the culture of the text. The intrinsic empowerment of dialogue can then serve as a tool for modeling a respect for diversity. Dialogue involving dual language picture books also means learning to read—and to value reading—the illustrations of a text. This graphic element represents Aboriginal peoples' cultural experience, reflecting or complementing the narrative. Wason-Ellam (2010) explains that dual language picture books are also dual texts in a second manner: They are both verbal and visual texts and provide both verbal and visual cues to shape reader response. The illustrations complement and affect the reading of the verbal cues, and the verbal cues provide insight into how to read the visual.

Interpreting visual cues. The artwork chosen for David Bouchard's *Nokum is My Teacher* is [Allen Sapp's representation of life on the Red Pheasant Reserve](#) in Saskatchewan and serves to connect contemporary and remembered culture. In one illustration, for example, the woman occupies the center of the home in a maternal role, tending her baby in the cradleboard (Bouchard, 2006, np). The effect is to create a more intimate scene whereas there is more of a sense of spaciousness in the original painting (Bauche, Tootoosis, & Carrier, 2005). The cooking fire, with its practical and symbolic significance, unfortunately does not appear in the textual illustration (Bauche et al., 2005; Bouchard, 2006). The detail of the mother's and baby's facial structures, as opposed to other illustrations with more simply suggested faces, provides the viewer with an added sense of intimacy and invites the reader more deeply into the text. There is a soft, subtle texture to the grass in the tipi and smoother, longer strokes depict the blankets and the cradleboard (Heshka, personal communication, June 21, 2010);¹ the viewer can almost feel the softness of the grass and the smoothness of the cradleboard made for the infant. The illustration offers a glimpse of family bonding to those who come from different heritages. Reading the illustrations such as this one requires another vocabulary and provides another layer of richness to the text.

Reading texts as verbal and visual social documents. Reading dual language texts for more than narrative complexity—but, instead, as a social document, for example—can be a rewarding experience for teacher-learners and students. This educational experience can follow the paradigm Giroux (1992) articulates as border pedagogy, addressing the frames of power and knowledge in the classroom and engaging in explicit terms with one's own values and practice. The more a teacher-learner can engage in and demonstrate the practice of bringing consciousness to one's beliefs and

pedagogy, the more border pedagogy can become an authentic model in the classroom. When students see their educators not only passionate about their subject, but also discussing their own learning processes and journeys, with all its attendant challenges, then students are freer to display and engage with their own uncertainties.

Learning Literacy/ies Through Reading Dual Language Picture Books

The ability to read text and illustration accurately and comprehensively is dependent on one's literacy level or the ability to decode word and image in context. Put another way, the capacity to negotiate embedded context determines one's level of literacy, or the facility with which one engages in meaning making, a notion foregrounded in Street's work to re-imagine literacy as rooted in specific socio-cultural and historical frameworks (Bartlett & Holland, 2002). Each of these complex contexts affects the creation and interpretation of a given text. In dual language picture books such as *Nokum is My Teacher*, learning occurs through family relationships in communities that value oral teachings with Elders who are able to instruct youths. The child seeks to find the answers to questions about his place in a society much different from the one of his predecessors. The corresponding illustration is a painting of several horse-drawn sleds that are taking people towards the warmth of the home nestled against the trees (Bouchard, 2006): home is embedded in the landscape. The child narrating the text says to his grandmother/*Kokum*,

You've taught me everything I know,

To walk and talk – to sing and drum,

To know the tree deserves respect

To feel to care, to love ...

Piko kikway kâkiskitamân

ê-kiskinohamôwihin

Ka-pimohtêyân, ka-pikiskwêyân,

ka-nikamoyân,

Êkwa ka- pahkamahak [sic] mistikwaskîhk. (Bouchard, 2006, np).²

The grandmother's response is indicative of her (cultural) values: "*Should we not share our learnings?/ Kakikisikinomâkiyak ci kikway/ e-kiskiyitamak?*" (Bouchard, 2006, np). She asserts,

I'm waiting, child, to lend a hand

When I know that you need me.

For now your Nokum is content

To watch you learn to see.

Ê-pewiyan ôma nôsim

Tansisi kisiswîchitan?

Ê-kiskitamân piko tawîchitan.

Tepehiten êkwa kohkom,

Kiskiyitamowin ka-wahpatên. (Bouchard, 2006, np)

The question roughly translates into “I’m waiting, grandchild/ How can I go out with you?” (C. D’Or, personal communication, February 7, 2011; E. D’Or, personal communication, February 7, 2011), evoking the traditional teaching environment on the land. Corresponding to this narrative is another illustration of experience: under an overcast sky, a dog rests on a pile of hay on a sled with both hay and the wood grain detailed; leading off the illustration, one child pulls another on a homemade sled. In the paintings chosen from Sapp’s oeuvre to illustrate the text, forms of daily living and travel and work figure prominently. The illustrations serve as a graphic representation of Cree peoples’ strong relationships with the land and link and contextualize the dialogic exchange of the grandson and his *Kokum*. These relationships are even more important in the legacy of residential schools and the resultant disconnect of familial relationships and of peoples from their home landscapes.

Dual language picture books encourage dialogue about context, illustrating significant events such as tea dances or powwows. While the dancers’ faces are not clear in *Nokum is My Teacher*, the details of fringe and beading and feathers of the outfits draw the viewer’s attention (Heshka, personal communication, June 21, 2010). The drummers and dancers wear vibrant colors; the crowd, rendered in the background in more neutral colors, gathers under what appears to be a fabric tent (Heshka, personal communication, June 21, 2010). Participating in community events provides grounding in cultural identity for the grandson and insight for the reader into the centrality of these cultural celebrations. At the round dances I attended as an educator, I was able to witness how these gatherings served to reinforce social and community relationships and pride in the culture, which gave rise to the dances and songs.

Seeking Decolonizing Methodology/ies as a White Educator

Exploring representations of Aboriginal cultures through the study of dual language picture books and decolonizing strategies in the classroom can serve to subvert forms of systemic oppression inherent to Eurocentric canons. Addressing canonical issues in a decolonizing methodology is but one part of the challenge; however, one must also work to deconstruct one’s own approach to both curricula and pedagogy despite the inherent limitations and complexity of such an approach. This is not a new concern, but one which requires mindfulness:

If teachers do not bracket their own basic assumptions about curriculum and pedagogy, they do more than transmit unquestioned attitudes, norms, and beliefs. They unknowingly may end up endorsing forms of cognitive and dispositional development that strengthen rather than challenge existing forms of institutional oppression. (Giroux, 1981, p. 104)

This is most particularly important, I would argue, when non-Aboriginal educators are working with Aboriginal students and seeking to use decolonizing pedagogical strategies. As success in the classroom is often predicated on cultural capital and the possession of academic English, interrupting and querying this practice is challenging. However, if one can use dual language picture books as a decolonizing strategy, thereby including Aboriginal stories in the classroom, numerous perspectives can be explored.

Querying Discourses

In *Nokum is My Teacher*, the grandson expresses trouble with the predominance of a form of literacy and perspective that appears to have nothing to do with the traditional ways of life of his uncles and grandparents:

The books they have are of *their* world,

They don't play by our people's rules/

Masinahikanak anihi ka-ayâcik,

Namoya anima kiyânaw kipimâtisinânaw. (Bouchard, 2006, np)

Facing this page is an illustration depicting families trekking through the snow to attend services in a modest white church, part of the family of institutions to cause lasting damage in the agenda to "educate" and assimilate Aboriginal peoples. The unmarred snow in the original painting suggests the space and isolation of the landscape into which the church blends itself, and the churchgoers blend, without detail, into their surroundings (Heshka, personal communication, June 21, 2010). It is in such a landscape that listening and looking is of utmost importance to surviving and thriving. Dual language picture books such as *Nokum is My Teacher* reinforce how dialogue, or a willingness to listen as well as talk, is necessary to the communication process: "If these things are important/ Why did *you* not learn to read?" (Bouchard, 2006, np). The emphatic question's importance is underscored by repetition in Cree:

Kispin e-wâchasik, tanihki mâka kiya

Namoya eki-âyamicikiyin...?

...

Kispin iko e-wâchasik, tanihki mâka kiya/ epe-âyamicikêyin?"

(Bouchard, 2006, np)

Opposite the query is Sapp's remembrance of Cree men leaning against the inside wall of a cabin as they converse; a drum features prominently along one wall and an implement for scraping hides hangs over the calendar (Bouchard, 2006). The graphic inclusion of both large celebratory gatherings and the more intimate, everyday exchanges of people suggest the importance of such interactions in learning processes. Learning to read the illustrations together as a class provides an opportunity to support those students with an ability to read in a different medium, answering in the affirmative the grandson's query:

And do they even know or care

That we are here, that we were there?

Do you think they care at all

About *our* way, about *our* culture?

Namakîkway nakatôtkewak ota e-hayâyak.

Kiteyitin ci enâk atôkêcik nehiyaw

pimâtisowin? (Bouchard, 2006, np)

Here is a means of discursive entry. Unfortunately, because literatures exist within a hierarchical form (Hymes, 2003, p. 46), it becomes imperative that teacher-learners help to create a more egalitarian atmosphere for reading literatures in the classroom and to assist students in making connections to the texts.

The child of *Nokum is My Teacher* poses a question significant to his understanding of his place in the world when he asks of his grandmother,

Do you think the white world's meant for me?

Moniyânâhk ci naki-pimâtisin? (Bouchard, 2006, np)

He asserts his connection to traditional forms of teaching:

I love the way *you* teach me

Through stories and through songs

Nisâhkitan oma kikway kakiskinothâmowin.

Acimowina ekwa nikamowina e-âpacitayin

(Bouchard, 2006, np).

His concern is set against an illustration of two sets of travelers, traveling in opposite directions, stopping their horse-guided sleds to converse in the midst of an expansive, snow-covered field. One traveler gestures as he talks, and log cabins can be seen set in the background against the tree line (Bouchard, 2006). With the child's learning supported by his grandmother's gentle guidance, he ultimately rejoices in his ability to find the answers to his questions, deciding that there are elements to learn from both worlds. Like his grandmother, one can use dialogue in order to facilitate learning in a decolonizing pedagogy.

Creating learning communities. Dialogue, as a decolonizing strategy, creates a place for teachers to transform into teacher-learners, scaffolding student learning even as the teacher models in tangible ways how one explores narrative and illustration. In so doing, dual language texts can support the building of different forms of communities of learners within a classroom, and the classroom need not be comprised of multicultural and/or multilingual students as learners to engage profitably with an examination of how one learns—particularly in relation to one's identity. While Bruner (1996) argues for building learning communities to connect students in more authentic and, hence, more

effective terms to what they are learning, creating these communities can be problematic, as the historical relationships between non-Aboriginal teachers and Aboriginal learners have not been based in the mutual respect that is necessary for creating mutual learning communities. The impetus of education in residential schools was to “kill the Indian in the child” (Harper, 2008, para. 2). The notion of creating communities of learners can be a challenge for both teacher-learners and community members, particularly if mutual distrust marks the historical relationship between the community and the outsiders who arrive to instruct or “educate” the community’s youth.

Exploring storied knowledge. Dual language texts can provide validation for students of Aboriginal descent and a foundation from which to explore other cultures for students from dominant societies—with the caveat that the teacher-learner must appropriately contextualize what may appear as simplistic text. In the foreword to David Bouchard’s *The Secret of Your Name: Kiimooch ka shinikashooyen*, in English and Michif text, Bouchard (2010) writes, “Many of our grandparents were humiliated into denying their Native ties in favour of their more acceptable European bloodlines” (np). The narrative mourns the loss of Bouchard’s connection to the cultures and languages of his Anishnaabe, Montagnais, Chippewa, Menominee, Algonquin, and Ojibwa heritages. He writes, “Nokum – I am sad to say / I do not know your stories” (Bouchard, 2010, p. 20). The facing page contains the translation in Michif: “Nokoom sid valeur chi itwaeyaan / Nimoo gishkaytenn tii zistwayr” (Bouchard, 2010, p. 21). Dual language picture books such as Bouchard’s explore the experience of cultural loss and readers who are not of Aboriginal descent gain an opportunity to come to a new understanding through both the narrative and the beautiful illustrations that accompany the print text.

The exploration of illustration and narrative in dual language picture books can create dialogic opportunities for learners. In *The Drum Calls Softly*, a text co-written by David Bouchard and Shelley Willier (2008) includes illustrations that reinforce the symbolism of the text rather than representing remembered lives (Heshka, personal communication, June 21, 2010). The narrator says,

Your heart and mine have beat as one

We’ve danced all night around that drum.

You held my hand and you stayed with me.

You now are family; you’re a part of me.

Kiteh ekwa niteh peyakwan e-matwecik

Kiwapan wasikasimowinaw mistikwaskihk.

E-sakinskeniyin ekwa ekisaci wiciwiyin.

Peyakwan niwakomakan ekwa kiya. (Bouchard & Willier, 2008, np)

The experience of the round dance connects the participants in deep and meaningful ways. The watercolor painting(s) by James Poitras (Bouchard & Willier, 2008) depict the school gym as the setting of the round dance with groups of people clustering together in the bleachers and sitting along the edge of the dance floor under signs that say

“← ELDERS AREA →” (Bouchard & Willier, 2008, np). Here distinct identities are unimportant; people are silhouettes rather than identifiable individuals. At the edge of the illustration, Eagle (*Miksu*), radiant in gold metallic paint, watches over the participants (Bouchard & Willier, 2008). Notably, many of the illustrations depict people outside in the environment, with the first two paintings depicting people dancing around a tree, and all but one painting include the presence of birds watching over the events below (Bouchard & Willier, 2008). Perhaps the inclusion of the environment here is to suggest the connection of culture and the landscape.

Expanding reading practices. In using a decolonizing pedagogy, learning about and connecting to culture through decoding dual language picture books requires teacher-learners and students to become what Giroux (1992) refers to as border-crossers, explicitly addressing notions of power and hierarchy (systemic and cultural) to create a space in which to dialogue about borders and margins and the challenges of learning in those locations. Dual language picture books such as Bouchard’s provide an invitational link to cultures with which students may be unfamiliar and create an opportunity to expand reading practices, as decoding illustrations and the accompanying text can be a complex event. As a non-Cree person with limited comprehension of Cree, I am acutely aware of how much there is to learn each time I engage with a dual language Cree-English text as a border-crosser and observe how language contains both implicit and explicit values, as articulated most notably by Whorf (1956) and Freire (1987). When I lived in the North, I learned firsthand the linguistic and experiential shaping of knowledge. I came to recognize some of my misperceptions as my knowledge grew and found new language to describe what I was experiencing. I sought to answer the call to engage with the community in which I was working since I did not share the community’s cultural background (Coelho, Costiniuk, & Newton, 1995). If one is working with Aboriginal texts and instructing in an urban setting rather than in an Aboriginal community, there are often cultural centers to which one can go to connect with those who have the knowledge, to explore more fully and respectfully the heritage represented in the text. Because identity and language are interconnected (Gumperz & Cook-Gumperz, 1982), it is helpful to participate in language classes oneself or to invite Elders to speak to one’s class. In such a way, teacher-learners can explore dual language picture books with students in open and inclusive ways.

Dual Language Texts as Opportunities for Inclusive, Cross-Cultural Dialogue

Whether a facilitator of knowledge in a multicultural and multilingual classroom, a facilitator of knowledge in a classroom where the teacher is the ‘Other’, or a facilitator of knowledge in a classroom where most of the students share the same cultural heritage as their instructor, employing dual language texts offers a method to engage in productive forms of cross-cultural communication as part of a decolonizing strategy. Dual language picture books offer an opportunity for dialogue with readers, and merit a place among postsecondary studies as well. These texts provide an opportunity to broaden students’ notions of literacy in particular and, of learning in general, to expand the possible ways of perceiving the world in which one lives. Because teachers in remote reserve schools (especially non-Aboriginal teachers) teach within the legacy of the cultural relationship between settler societies and Aboriginal peoples, a postmodern analysis of subjectivity and the plurality of meaning can help to move beyond an “Us/Them” framework. If a

teacher-learner is to model respect of diversity, one of the most powerful ways to do so is to participate in the literary and social process of interpretation and border crossing alongside students. Dual language texts must negotiate a multiplicity of frames of reference, philosophies, and codes within a single narrative and, thereby, offer rich opportunities for dialogic engagement in the classroom. Ultimately, modeling respect for diversity and moving to a model of inclusivity is a complex and time-consuming process. It means building and maintaining relationships with members of the community, following protocols (and finding out what they are in order to follow them), and creating opportunities for and then supporting students' efforts to do the same. It may mean accessing Friendship Centres, connecting with staff in reserve schools if they exist nearby, and meeting and developing rapport with Elders. This process may occur in a classroom, a kitchen, or out in the local environment. It may be in an urban or rural context. It likely will be a challenge to establish and maintain properly, and it most likely will challenge one's own beliefs—pedagogical and otherwise—in unexpected ways. The potential rewards of including dual language picture books as part of a decolonizing strategy in one's pedagogy and in connecting to community, however, are many and diverse. Using such texts may help students come to a new understanding of their own subjectivities, beliefs, and values because of their language and their place in society, and it may introduce them to dual language picture books and validate sharing them with their own students one day as well.

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Endnotes

¹ Engaging with picture books provided an opportunity to consult with colleagues and former students about how to read paintings and translate text, underscoring the possibilities intrinsic to cooperative meaning-making.

² While there is movement toward using a Standard Roman Orthography, publishers deal with representing Cree sounds in different forms, from phonetics to employing symbols such as macrons or circumflex accent marks.