Victorian Sensibilities in the New Wild West: A Critical Reading of the Western and Northern Canadian Protocol for English Language Arts

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> "[L]anguage—can never be neutral, it imposes a point of view not only about the world to which it refers but toward the use of mind in respect of this world."
>
> – Jerome Bruner

Introduction

During the 1880's Canada's nascent government established a settlement policy for the West which sought to impose a thoroughly British social order on its new frontier. As a result, the community of Cannington Manor was constructed in the heart of Canada's prairies. Wealthy settlers from the British Empire arrived to build estate homes with servants, mercantile stores, a pork packing facility, cheese factories, a hotel, an Anglican church, a town hall and school in what is now southern Saskatchewan. Unwilling to give up Victorian institutions such as fox hunting, starched collars, horse racing and lawn tennis, these settlers used their energies to transplant sensibilities which did not acknowledge the demands of a challenging natural environment and fluid global markets.

Less than two decades later, Cannington Manor was abandoned and came to signify a failed social experiment. Community member Inglis Sheldon-Williams later wrote that, "[b]uilt upon a raw new country, on unstable foundations, the anomaly (Cannington Manor) could not endure,

but the short life was a merry one… If we did nothing else we contributed a piquant chapter to the literature of pioneering" (Saskatchewan Parks, 2003, p. 2, online). Arguably, misplaced Victorian sensibilities had failed to acknowledge, or adapt to, the realities of Canada's challenging and changing prairie landscape.

A similar argument may be made of modernist educational institutions that are attempting to impose their authority on dynamic multi-literacy practices (including digitally-based communications, interactive multi-media texts, and fluid identities) in postmodern times. Through a close reading of the Western Northern Canadian Protocol's (WNCP) Common Curriculum Framework for English Language Arts (CCFELA) which draws on Bruner's (1986) notion of 'constitutive' language, we assert that there exists a tension between modernist high stakes evaluation methods, the prescriptive intentions of the general outcomes of the WCNP, and the post-modernist realities of contemporary students' emerging multi-literacies. We believe that, as illustrated in the analogy of Cannington Manor, traditionalist educational sensibilities as expressed in curricula such as the WNCP will give way to the energies of changing literacy landscapes.

Figure 1. Fox hunting on the Canadian Prairies

Changing landscapes

"Contemporary kids meet contemporary texts… . The textual ecology within which they function is fluid; so are they."

– Margaret Mackey

The literacy landscape for today's senior language arts students is very different from that of ten years ago; at least in their home and recreational lives. Contemporary schools struggle to keep up with the corporate-driven explosion in consumer-oriented communication technologies of the past decade that students engage with readily at home, through parents' work sites, or at friend's homes. The communications technologies they explore in these familiar and familial sites are often faster, and replaced more quickly, than those which are available in the classrooms they inhabit. Since the mid-1990's the Internet, WWW, cell-phones, digital cameras, MP3's, JPEG's and such have brought immediate text and multi-modal based forms of communication into students' lives. These forms of communication are "madly contradictory: anonymous, but traceable; instantaneous, then saved forever [unless deleted in a snit]" (Nussbaum, January, 11, 2004).

The rapidly changing nature of the communications technology horizon, and its implications was noted almost ten years ago by members of the New London Group. In their Harvard Educational Review article, they called for "a much broader view of literacy than portrayed by traditional language-based approaches" (p. 60). Their understanding of evolving multi-literacies in liminal times explored the need for "a different kind of pedagogy, one in which language and other modes of meaning are dynamic representational resources, constantly being remade by their users as they work to achieve their various cultural purposes" (p. 64).

A multitude of other educational researchers and theorists (Barrell, 2001; Mackey, 2003; Selfe, 1999) have echoed the New London Group and asked what it means to be literate within this evolving landscape, especially when one considers that the "one-medium user is the new illiterate" (Zingrone, 2000). Many educational policy makers of the time also recognized the need for re-writing Language Arts curricula. A joint provincial and territorial effort resulted in the completion and eventual implementation of the WNCP document in 1998. Drawing from Bruner (1986) who views culture as comprised of an ambiguous text that is constantly in need of interpretation by those who participate in it, we will explore the language of WNCP for English Language Arts to understand its view of students' and emerging multi-literacies, and its prescribed response to that changing landscape.

Static Sensibilities

> "The ability to use language effectively enhances students' opportunities to experience personal satisfaction and to become responsible, contributing citizens and lifelong learners."
>
> – WNCP

The Western/Northern Canadian Protocol

In 1993, an agreement for the development of the Western/Northern Canadian Protocol for Collaboration in Basic Education was signed by the Ministers of Education from Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, British Columbia, Yukon, and the North West Territories. Nunavut signed on to the project seven years later. In the preamble to the 1993 protocol the Ministers of Education acknowledged that, though education is a provincial jurisdiction in Canada, common expectation and concerns regarding basic education among Canadian provinces could be addressed through a collaborative inter-provincial process. A similar viewpoint and process was also engaged in by Canada's Maritime provinces. Further, the ministers agreed the WNCP should both establish high standards for education and ensure students access to an array of educational opportunities. The primary issue the ministers identified in the agreement was *the need to optimize the limited resources of the provinces in improving education*. To that end, the provinces agreed to collaboratively create new curricula and to work together to develop both standards of student performance and student assessment programs.

The Common Curriculum Framework for English Language Arts (CCFELA)

In 1998 the CCFELA was completed. Alberta Learning served as the lead department in the development of this document. Reaction panels composed of teachers, administrators, parents, post-secondary educators, business representatives, and members of community organizations provided feedback on the process and the product. This collaborative effort resulted in the identification of common educational goals and student learning outcomes designed to prepare students for present and future language requirements:

> Clear student learning outcomes and high learning standards in the ELA curriculum Framework are designed to prepare students for present and future language requirements. Changes in society and technology have affected and will continue to affect the ways in which students use language to think, to communicate, to learn. Students must be prepared to meet new literacy demands in Canada and the international community. The ability to use language effectively enhances students' opportunities to experience personal satisfaction and to become responsible, contributing citizens and lifelong learners (p. vii)

These learning outcomes were translated into five general outcomes, which provide an overall structure to the framework. These outcomes follow:

> Students will listen, speak, read, write, view, and represent to:
> 1. explore thoughts, ideas, feelings, and experiences
> 2. comprehend and respond personally and critically to oral, print, and other media texts.
> 3. manage ideas and information
> 4. enhance clarity and artistry of communication
> 5. celebrate and enhance community (WNCP, 1998, p. 4)

The document is unified through its emphasis on incorporating each of the six language arts strands–listening, reading, writing, speaking, viewing, and representing–into each general outcome. As well, woven throughout the document is an emphasis on critical thinking and meta-cognitive skills.

In *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*, Jerome Bruner (1986) suggests that our use of language has a constitutive role in creating social reality and concepts of our 'selves.' This has important implications for the culture of education and the concepts of self that teachers and students co-construct particularly through readings of and engagement with curricula. The WNCP was written by individuals employed by the various ministries of education in Western and Northern Canada. Their underlying assumptions about education and, language arts in particular, are revealed by reading through their theoretical underpinnings and language.

Theoretically the authors ground themselves in the works of such theorists as Bloom (1956), Maslow (1954). There is a strong behavioralist approach to the broader concepts of learning here:

> Students actively acquire skills and learn knowledge. They use language to examine new experiences and knowledge in relation to their prior knowledge, experiences, and beliefs. They make connections, anticipate possibilities, reflect upon ideas, and determine courses of action… Language enables students to play an active role in various communities of learners within and beyond the classroom. As students speak, write, and represent, they also listen to, read, and view the ideas and experiences of others (WNCP, 1998, p. 2).

A mix of traditional and more recent perspectives on language arts pedagogy is apparent through the use of research and writings by Calkins (1991), Daniels (1994), Elbow (1981), Halliday (1975), and Rosenblatt (1993) to name a few. Here, one may note a focus on the traditional strands of reading and writing with a reserved acknowledgement of emerging literacies. Regional perspectives are provided through ministry-funded studies and professional subject area concerns are voiced through various publications by the International Reading Association and National Council of Teachers of English.

Although there is acknowledgment of emerging literacies and the need to integrate alternate texts, the language that the authors of the WNCP use

is not negotiatory. It is assumed that there are authorities in education and language arts. These authorities' recommendations, as voiced through the curriculum, are to be implemented by the classroom teacher and achieved by students. For Bruner, the cultural setting of education should ideally be one of a 'forum' for performing negotiations of language, rather than transmissions of language, as a means of "exploring possible worlds out of the context of immediate need" (p.132). In the WNCP, teachers act as conduits of good practice in a top down approach to student learning. Indeed modernist sensibilities are being imposed on postmodern possibilities. This leads to very specific tensions within the WCNP as document and experience.

Articulating the Tensions

While the expected outcomes, the focus on critical thinking, and the emphasis on the interconnectedness of the six language arts strands are clearly articulated in the ELA framework, its overall purpose, in terms of education, is not clear. The original impetus for the WNCP was economic and it seems that this purpose has filtered down into the ELA framework as well. On the other hand, the document's language seems to project the idea of 'student' as an active and autonomous learner. As such, a tension regarding purposes exists within the document: Whose purpose, the provinces' or the students', is best served within the context of the ELA framework?

In response to the issue of emerging multi-literacies and their economic and interpersonal influence, the WNCP's ELA framework had adopted an expanded understanding of text. It states, texts refer not only to print but also to oral and visual forms that can be discussed, studied and analyzed. In addition, texts, are affected and influenced by how they are transmitted, whether by computer, television, radio, or book" (p 3). Yet the tensions identified by the New London Group (1996) persist. How are these new literacies to be understood? How are they to be negotiated? And how are they to be assessed? The WNCP framework leaves these considerations unresolved.

A further tension within the WNCP exists in regards to standards and assessments. The WNCP was developed to support high standards of education in the territories and the western provinces, yet at no point in the ELA framework are those standards clearly defined. The protocol, however, links standards with assessment rather than curriculum when it states as a future goal the development of common standards and assessments. No WNCP common standards or assessments have yet been developed. In each province, though, grade 12 students are expected to demonstrate their mastery of the curriculum outcomes through the completion of the provincially mandated diploma, or exit exams.

Robinson (2000) illustrates the tension that exists in such contexts when he suggests that rather than support curricula, assessments constrain them.

He argues, "Certainly no one can disagree with setting standards, but the problem becomes what standards to set. And here assessment becomes political. Does one set standards that conform to a traditional transmission view of curriculum and assessment, or choose the more difficult task, the road not yet often taken: to use assessment and standards to support and enhance a constructivist, transactional curriculum" (p.276)? Kane (2002) supports Robinson's argument. He claims that exit exam programs, which certify student achievement in relation to curriculum outcomes, must, over several forms of their exams, sample all the outcomes listed in that curriculum. He notes, however, that too often some curriculum objectives are consistently ignored within certification contexts. The act of selecting objectives or outcomes for the purpose of measurement while consistently ignoring others, is simultaneously an act of privileging one set of outcomes over others. That which is deemed important, or that which is valued most highly, is what is assessed.

The analysis of exam design and content can provide information regarding what elements of the curriculum are valued and what are not. One can also examine these biases and resultant tensions through the language
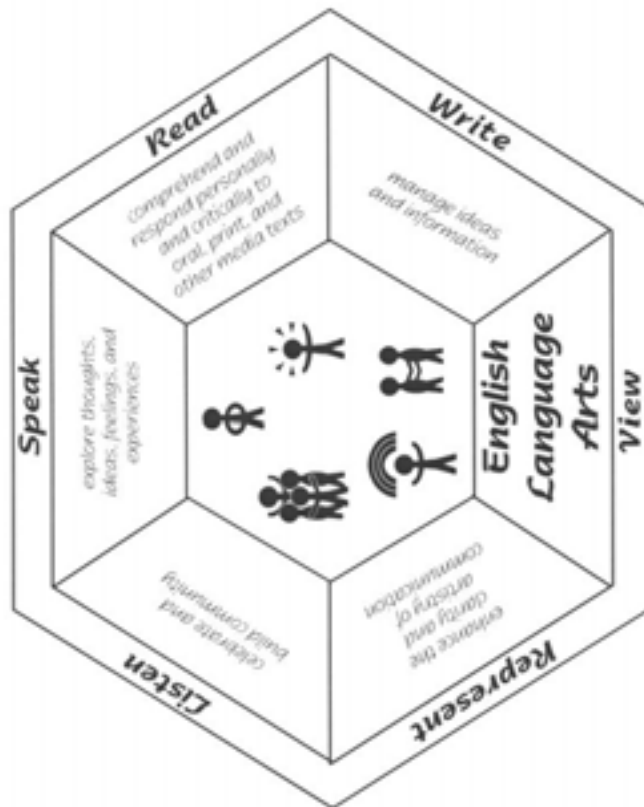

Figure 2. WNCP framework (p. 5)

that constitutes the text itself–through an examination of the document's philosophical foundations as demonstrated in its expression of the importance of language and its definition of 'student' particularly through its conception of 'learning.'

'Language'

> "[L]anguage is an unmistakable mark of personal identity, and is essential for forming interpersonal relationships, extending experience, reflecting on thought and action, and contributing to a democratic society."
>
> – WNCP

Foundational to a critical understanding of the WNCP is an understanding of its conception of 'language'. The WNCP ELA framework grounds its understanding of 'language' in a Vygotskian perspective. As such, it defines language as a tool. It recognizes that skill in applying this tool is developed within social contexts. The CCFELA links this tool directly with understandings of thought, and it acknowledges that skills needed to apply this tool are transferable across contexts. Multiple purposes for language use are also suggested throughout the document. These purposes include the following: to facilitate thinking, define culture, develop personal identity, build interpersonal relationships, extend experience, facilitate reflection, contribute to a democratic society, construct and convey meanings, and to facilitate metacognitive awareness. Each of these purposes, however, begs a larger purpose, identifiable in the question: To what end? For example, to what end do we use language to facilitate thinking, or to construct meanings? This larger purpose is not clearly defined in the framework. However the various provincial curricula that were developed on the basis of the WNCP framework illustrate more clearly what larger purposes the provinces had in mind when drawing up the document.

British Columbia's Senior High ELA curriculum places the student's personal development as a primary purpose for developing language skills. BC requires students to demonstrate their understanding of themselves as self-directed, curious, self-appraising, and open minded learners (British Columbia Ministry of Education Skills and Training, 1996, p. 54). Along with Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba it ties student personal development to larger economic purposes: acquiring employability skills, and becoming responsible, contributing citizens. This larger economic purpose should not be surprising. As stated earlier, economic concerns, rather than pedagogical or theoretical ones, provided the original impetus for the project, it seems natural that such concerns would filter down throughout the document.

'Student'

> "Students will ...."   – WCNP

Placing the document within this larger economic context, reveals further tensions within the WNCP's ELA framework. One such tension involves the role of the student within K–12 system of education. The WNCP ELA framework views students as active participants who learn within social contexts. The curricula derived from the WNCP certainly interpret this understanding differently. For example, British Columbia articulates a view of the student as being actively involved in the learning process, assuming increasing responsibility for learning, it expects that students will develop an increasing understanding of themselves and of their abilities as they progress in their education, and it recognizes that personality features and background experiences impact on learning situations.

On the other hand, Alberta presents the view of a student who is enacted upon, who will be encouraged to . . . (Alberta Learning, 2003, p. 21), and who will become responsible (Alberta Learning, 2003, p. 1). It does not directly suggest an active participant in the learning process though its heavy focus on developing metacognitive skills suggests that students must be actively engaged and reflective in their learning. Both understandings are unified by the same question of purpose. To what end? To what end do we encourage active learning. Is this seen as a means of achieving the economic goals which frame the document? Are students encouraged to be active learners because active learners are more easily controlled and learn the objectives set out by the government more readily?

Active learning in its fullest sense is student centered, student driven. The student determines the outcomes he or she wishes to pursue rather than actively following a predetermined path or set of outcomes. None of the provincial curricula derived from the ELA framework are set up to facilitate this type of self-determining student. Rather, in each province the objectives are government mandated rather than student directed.

The various provincial Grade 12 English assessments also reflect this. For example, Alberta's new program of studies, designed on the basis of the WNCP ELA framework emphasizes the importance of developing metacognition skills in students. The skill is woven throughout the entire document. Alberta Learning (2003) claims,

> Many of the specific outcomes in this program of studies emphasize metacognition. Students recall and describe *what* they have done in a particular situation, and recount *how, when* and *why*. Students then assess the value of the strategies they have used, make modifications to them or abandon them in favour of new approaches, and monitor the use of these reworked or new strategies in future situations. (p. 2)

Metacognition is exactly the type of skill needed for students to be truly active learners. As they assess their skill development and determine new goals on the basis of past successes and failures they learn to chart their own course for future learning. Neither of the Grade 12 ELA diploma exams in Alberta currently assess metacognitive skills, even though Alberta's program of studies emphasizes its importance. Manitoba, in fact, is the only province that assesses metacognitive skills. For example, in its January 2004 Senior 4 ELA Standards Test students are asked to compete the following task:

> Identify one of the following writing variables: purpose, audience, or context. Explain how the form that you plan to use [for your major writing assignment] will be effective for the writing variable you identified.

In this case, students are asked to critically reflect on their choices and are expected to discuss how that choice will contribute to their writing.

The fact that this essential element of learning is untested in a majority of the jurisdictions that implemented the WNCP indicates the degree to which active learning, in a student centered sense, is actually devalued. And it suggests that active learning is valued as a tool for both enhancing and controlling student learning, as opposed to enhancing and expanding student learning. This contention is further supported by the WNCP's ELA framework development process. Teachers, administrators, parents, post-secondary educators, business representatives, and members of community organizations were consulted on the framework's development, but students, those most directly influenced by the project, were not consulted. Clearly, the discussions on program development revolved around how students would be acted upon, rather than on what learning students wished to enact. Students are expected to learn and acquire effective communication skills through the language arts to meet the needs defined by the ministries of education.

Explicitly the WCNP is structured to have the students learn effective communication skills so that they may express themselves, their understandings, and to receive the knowledge of others. Students are expected to demonstrate the specific learning outcomes for their current grade while building on and maintaining their ability to demonstrate the specific learning outcomes for previous grades (WNCP, 1998, p.4). Tacitly, the curriculum established by the western provinces and the three northern territories is encouraging students to reproduce a priori communication skills/knowledge in hopes of producing good citizens. Students have room for exploration of new literacies and texts only through the doorway of pre-existing and authoritatively prescribed practices. There is no defined room for students to bring in their own lived experiences with emerging literacy. As well, there is a single pathway to success as a productive citizen through acquisition and

mastery of skills. Students are expected to complete learning tasks successfully as part of a democratic learning community. Apple would note, here, that the term "democratic" also has implications of the students tacitly learning to become more effective consumers of others' texts or products.

Cannington Manor Revisited?

Community and culture in the WNCP

> "Once one takes the view that a culture itself compromises an ambiguous text that is constantly in need of interpretation by those who participate in it, then the constitutive role of language in creating social reality becomes a topic of practical concern."
>
> – J. Bruner

The ends being served in the WNCP are clearly those of government, educational administrators, and corporate interests –not students. Teachers and students are expected to complete communication tasks and achieve mastery of prescribed learning outcomes in an efficient and effective manner. Students are to become productive and to be able to respond personally to the texts or products of others through costly digital-based technologies. While students are encouraged to think critically, they are not encouraged to think or act against the grain of the prescribed common curriculum framework. The participating provincial and territorial governments, in consultation with educational policy-makers and corporations state that this framework was established to achieve: "high standards of education; common educational goals; ease of transfer from jurisdiction to jurisdiction; and optimum use of educational resources (WNCP, 1993, online)." There is no space for the multi-literate needs of students in liminal times here.

There is an apparent lack of figurative language in this document. Educational stakeholders are meant to take the protocol at face value. Yet, with a close reading of the WNCP it becomes evident that the use of the terms "student" and "community" are themselves metaphors. As Bruner states, language can never be neutral. These terms are used as metaphors to represent constructed notions of who "the student" is, or how they should be rather than acknowledging differences in gender, race, and economic status. "Student" becomes a cookie-cutter term. The interests and existing structure of the institutions which created this document (governmental, educational, and corporate) are represented by the term "community". Students are expected to successfully mirror this culture in their own classrooms and to enter as a productive element into this "community."

Bruner (1986) believes that much of education has lost this sense of wonder and exploration by merely transmitting culture and knowledge. Students are seen as participants in this culture, but as participants that are given a role "as performing spectators who play out their canonical roles according to rule when the appropriate cues appear"(p. 123). This causes the child to only identify himself as owner, as user, never as creator; he does not invent the world, he uses it; there are prepared for him actions without adventure, without wonder, without joy (Barthes, 1974). Bruner would rather that students have a role in making and remaking the culture of education, in negotiating meaning, and opening a sense of wonder.

If students are allowed, through openness in the curriculum and their teachers' language, to become part of a negotiation, facts then are created and interpreted. The students become "at once an agent of knowledge making as well as a recipient of knowledge transmission" (Bruner, p.127). The role of teachers then, in part, is to use language to negotiate meanings in relation to the texts of the students' lives, the curriculum, and educational culture. Bruner (1986, p. 132) believes that only through opening curriculum's possibilities, through an understanding of the importance of language, can teachers allow students to help create that culture:

> If he [a student] fails to develop any sense of what I shall call reflective intervention in the knowledge he encounters, the young person will be operating continually from the outside in – knowledge will control and guide him. If he succeeds in developing such a sense, he will control and select knowledge as needed. If he develops a sense of self that is premised on his ability to penetrate knowledge for his own uses, and if he can share and negotiate the result of his penetrations, then he becomes a member of the culture-creating community.

Learning here, becomes a constructed experience within a community that can respond to, and perhaps transform, the challenges and changes of postmodern multi-literate landscapes.

Traditional sensibilities and changing landscapes

> "At the heart of any social change one often finds fundamental changes in regard to our conceptions of knowledge and thought and learning, changes whose fulfillment is impeded and distorted by the way in which we talk about the world and think about it in the coin of that talk."
>
> – J. Bruner

Today, the community of Cannington Manor is a provincial historical site in southeastern Saskatchewan. The skeletal remains of original buildings and

reconstructed frames of others, allows visitors to witness a social experiment in which Victorian sensibilities were imposed upon the unbroken prairie landscape of the 1880's. These sensibilities could not be sustained in light of the challenging environment and landscape of Canada's new wild-west.

For the past decade, educators have tried to come to terms with the contradictions between modernist industrial model schooling based on static print/book culture and competitive individualism, and the de-territorialized meaning making and knowledge configurations enabled by new technologies (Luke, 2003, p.398). Scholes (1998) declared the decline the field of traditional English studies, just as the study of Greek, Latin, and rhetoric has declined in the North American academic system. Education colleges across Canada have recently changed the name of their Language Arts departments to departments of Language and Literacy.

As educators, we should consider that contemporary young people in our society can enter textual representations through a variety of mediums, or as Mackey (2002) identifies them – "portals" – be they print, video, movies, MP3s, or online interactive connections. We must now ask, what new doorways can educators enter to bring about changes to language and literacy curricula which engage students' evolving literacy landscapes in ways that are more alert and fluid? For as we have seen, traditional sensibilities have a tendency to give way to the realities of changing landscapes.

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