

Upsetting Ourselves: Readings, Relations, and Other Unsettling Practices

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Encountering stories and others both helps us to locate ourselves – in identity, in place – and also dislodges us from the familiar, from ourselves. While our relations with each other from the earliest moments make us who we will be, throughout life those encounters, whether with actual others or with the others living in texts, also call us into question and ask us to reconsider who we might become. Each of the articles in this issue tackles this dynamic encounter by considering the challenges of being in relation to others and texts, of knowing differently, of reading and seeing differently, and ultimately of learning and teaching anew.

In our last issue, Celia Haig-Brown called on us to take up the challenge of thinking in new ways, arguing that “Indigenous thought has the potential to reframe and decentre, in intellectually productive and practical ways, conventional scholarship about most things including Canadian curriculum studies” (Haig-Brown, 2008, p. 13). In this issue, we pick up where she left off, beginning with a piece that takes up Haig-Brown’s call for curriculum scholars and educators to take Indigenous thought seriously in the context of Ontario Aboriginal education policy.

In his article, Cherubini suggests that the policy Framework “represents an opportunity for educators to dismantle the border world and create in their classrooms a conceptual space that honours Indigenous Knowledge, incorporates Aboriginal epistemologies, and fosters the self-identity of teacher and student alike.” In this way, educators’ willingness to confront their own epistemological, ontological, and pedagogical assumptions, and to engage with Indigenous knowledge and experience opens up the possibility of renewal for the conceptual space of the classroom and for their own experience of identity.

Consistent with Cherubini’s consideration of the challenge posed by Indigenous knowledge, Iseke-Barnes considers the ways in which our engagement with certain stories may unsettle our assumptions and “fictions” about indigenous cultures and peoples. Unlike literature that relies on cultural appropriation and thus reinforces stereotypes of indigenous peoples, indigenous literature unsettles the non-native reader for whom the native is often relegated to the past or to fantasy. In particular, Iseke-Barnes advocates “the practice of engaging with trickster stories to challenge Western assumptions.” She suggests that stories of the trickster might be particularly useful in upsetting the expected and often insisted upon structure of narrative, identity, and classroom community that dominate Western epistemologies and pedagogies. In such stories, “Coyote himself... [is] always reaching out beyond prescription and teaches ... us the limits of the world. And he teaches such limits through their violation ... so that the lessons of balance and respect can be learned once again” (Clifford, Friesen, & Jardine, 2001, p. 11).

In the article that follows Iseke-Barnes’ discussion of trickster stories, Radford moves us to consider what she calls “risky stories” and the ways in which they might offer teachers openings for re-thinking identity and practice. Indeed, Radford is curious about the reading of the “risky story” but also how the idea or fantasy of the risky text might offer

teacher-readers “an important point of address, a transit, which they used to define themselves provisionally as teachers.” The teachers’ readings initially suggest an enchantment with the risky story “that gestured toward their enmeshment with the illusory romance of the self as a teacher who embraces a risky text” and “its radical potential to deliver something significant in terms of pedagogical truth and knowledge.” However, as they continue to explore the text, “reading juvenile historical fiction catapulted the teacher apprentices into the medieval world of their own adolescence.” In this way, Radford explores how the experience of reading may offer both a challenge to the safe harbour of our selves and a place to retreat from and defend against the fragmentation of subjectivity.

Lewkowich traces a similar tension in his study of medical students reading together and struggling, through their readings, with the identity and culture they must adopt as medical professionals. Using the metaphor of the landwash – the stretch of beach exposed by low-tide, on which people may poach abandoned debris – Lewkowich argues that “what matters most in reading is not what you find, but what you make of what you find.” In particular, Lewkowich is interested in the ways the medical student-readers in his study make a space for themselves out of what they find in their readings and discussions with one another, “the manner in which they experience a space of collective reading, and how they set up such a space in opposition to what they understand as the dominant culture of medical school.” Ultimately, Lewkowich suggests that the practice of reading together offers openings toward freedom that has the potential to help us re-imagine curriculum as “an emergent and relational space of constructive alterity.”

Pente extends this notion of curriculum as a relational space by considering “the ways that landscape images become institutional markers for defining national identity and contribute to the ongoing development of personal and collective identity.” Offering a critical

history of the rise of the Group of Seven and their landscape paintings to the status of national icon, Pente insists that doing the cultural work required to unravel landscape and nation from one another “can be a catalyst to help students critically understand the roles that wilderness images play in the creation, maintenance, or disruption of normative assumptions embedded in nationalism.” In this way, the reading and re-reading of landscape images in the collective and diverse space of the classroom may both challenge the notion of Canada as a “wilderness nation” and also provide the grounds of possibility for new national formations to emerge through collective resistance. Indeed, Pente insists that these curricular discussions are a key part of the process by which teachers and students “come to know who they are in the time and place of contemporary life”: “relationships with images of the land are cogent parts of this kind of deep, reflexive inquiry.”

Courtland, Hammett, Strong-Wilson, Bainbridge, Johnston, Burke, Ward, Wiltse, Gonzales and Shariff continue the discussion around the significance of reading the landscape as both a geographical and ideological site. Their study highlights the significance of the construct of place in the development of “preservice teachers’ perceptions of Canadian identity and ideology as represented in Canadian multicultural children’s picture books.” Their study considers the complex ways in which identity and place are implicated and interwoven in our readings of texts and in our (in)ability to read texts in particular ways. While in some cases “the teacher candidates’ engagement with and response to the texts promoted reflections on and increased their understandings of their own identity as Canadians, of multiculturalism and diversity, and representations in the picture books,” Courtland et al. also note that in some cases the teacher candidates “were resistant to these understandings.” Noting both experiences of transformation and resistance, the authors, like others in this issue, point to the complex dynamics of reading as a practice that

calls into questions not only the self, but the experience of belonging to a place, of being a self in relation with others.

Importantly, what each of the papers in this issue suggests are the ways in which both transformation and resistance may be seen as modes of learning. Indeed, each of these articles in its own way argues that the most productive of curricular relations require us to upset ourselves and demand that we call into question accepted modes of thinking and seeing so that we might “work together to unconceal what is hidden, to contextualize what happens to us, to mediate the dialectic that keeps us on edge, that may be keeping us alive” (Greene, 1995, p. 115, cited in Lewkowich).