

Métis Literacy: A Grandmother's Story

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Preface

This paper is organized into three parts. Part One includes the Introduction, Research Methodology, Family Background and a Narrative of my maternal grandmother's life from childhood to adulthood. Part Two includes the Themes that I discuss in my analysis of the data and linking my analysis to the writings of Barton and Hamilton, Taylor, Gee, Urmston-Philips, Freire, Barnes, Bourdieu, Wason-Ellam and Ward. Part Three includes the summary of my research analysis, where I define my view of Métis literacy and the conclusion of how this experience has shaped me as a Métis woman and how I see Métis culture.

I hope that the joy I received in this experience is revealed in the writing. I hope the reader enjoys reading it as much as I did writing.

Part One

Introduction

I have always defined myself as being a Métis woman. When people would ask me, “What makes you Métis?” I would always respond that my mother was Métis and her parents were Métis. I was raised Métis, that was the culture into which I grew. But now faced with the dilemma of having to define “What makes me Métis?” and more specifically, “What is Métis literacy?” I need to move beyond the obvious cultural attributes of art, music, diet, dance, clothing and lifestyle. To answer the question of Métis literacy I needed to talk to my maternal grandmother.

Michif has been designated the language of the Métis. In my family, Cree and English have been the languages spoken. My maternal grandparents were able to understand Michif, because they both spoke Cree and French, and Michif is a creole of Cree and French languages. Personally, I grew up understanding basic command words in Cree like, “Come here”, “Go away”, “Sit down”, and “Come and eat.” Beyond this my fluency ends. I have always wanted to learn Cree, but I grew up with English as my first language. My mother married an English speaking non-Aboriginal, therefore English was the language spoken in our home. At family gatherings, Cree was spoken by

my mother's family. It appeared to be a language full of life and humour. I hated feeling left out. My mother tried to teach us Cree, but speaking primarily English in the home and in school and being bombarded by English media, it was an unrelenting challenge. Still, growing up in this environment I considered myself Métis. This still brings me to my question, "What is Métis literacy?"

Research Methodology

The research of this study was done on July 20th, 2001 in Meadow Lake, Saskatchewan. Meadow Lake is approximately 300 kilometres north-west of Saskatoon. It has a population of approximately 4 800, and situated among deciduous forest and many lakes. Meadow Lake is a forestry town, with three mills in operation and a fourth scheduled to be built in the next year. My mother's family has lived in this area for many years. My maternal grandfather's family has been here for many generations. My maternal grandmother has lived here since her birth. Her family moved to Meadow Lake from St. Paul, Alberta and previous to that lived in the Batoche area in Saskatchewan.

My research plan was to visit with my maternal grandmother and discuss the role of literacy in her life. The general purpose of the study was to

explore her living environment and how she used literacy so that I could describe Métis literacy.

The data gathering technique used in this study was primarily participant observation. I observed the environment in which she lived and the environment of literacy in her home. I observed her reading and writing. During the course of my research I visited with her and took notes while she described her experiences in literacy from childhood to adulthood. I did not formulate specific interview questions, or tape-record the conversations that took place. I did take field notes of our conversations over the course of the day. My source of information was my maternal grandmother, primarily using unstructured questioning. My analysis proceeded with comparing my field notes with readings related to my course and suggested readings from my professors. The position that I have as Métis woman educated in the dominant culture also has a lot to do with how I engaged in the analysis of the data. In my conclusion, I will describe my understanding about my own Métis culture from this experience.

Family Background

My maternal grandmother's family was made through the marriage of the Sansregret and Ridsdale families. The Sansregret family originated in

Batoche and moved to Alberta after the Resistance of 1885. My grandmother's mother, Aldina Sansregret, was raised in a convent in the Hobbema area in Alberta. She married John Ridsdale and lived they lived in St. Paul, Alberta. They had two daughters there, Mathilda and Eleanor, and then moved to Meadow Lake. My grandmother was born in Meadow Lake. Her family was made up of 11 children, six girls and five boys. My grandmother was the third oldest.

In Meadow Lake, they lived on a school section east of town. A school section was a few acres of land that has been set aside to build a school. They would spend their winters living on the school section and their summers living out on the ranch where her father worked. Her dad worked for the Clark family in Island Hill, north-east of Meadow Lake. He took care of Clark's cattle. There were approximately 500 head of cattle. This kept the family very busy tending to the needs of the ranch.

My maternal grandparents we affectionately call "Ma" and "Pa". I will refer to my maternal grandmother as "Ma" for the remainder of this paper. "Pa" died in 1995, he and Ma were married for over 57 years. They had six children, three girls and three boys. My mother is the third eldest in her family.

Childhood to Adulthood

Since there were two elder sisters already able to help in the house, Ma spent her most of her childhood out at the barn with her father. They were very poor and they needed to help with the work at the ranch. She learned how to harness and drive horses. She rode bare-back. She spent a lot of time with her brother Philip, "King".

Since Ma spent little time in the house, she didn't learn the "house things." She learned how to sew because of her dolls. At the age of eight, she started to make dolls out of old socks. Her mother did a lot of knitting so there were always lots of socks. She would take apart socks and use the wool to make hair. She would use black thread to make eyes and a mouth. Her mother saw this a waste of thread. Ma and her sister would make all kinds of dolls, big and little.

Ma and her siblings did not go to school. The school was three miles away and too far to walk. Later, they lived out of the school district and her dad would have had to pay fifty cents a day for one child to go to school.

They were too poor, so the kids stayed home and worked. Ma and her sister Eleanor would plant the garden. They would plant rows and rows of

vegetables. The garden was very large to feed everyone. Eleanor and Ma would get so tired of planting the rows and rows of parsnips and carrots. One time they held up a packet of carrots and parsnips in the wind and let it blow the seeds into the bushes. Imagine her mother's surprise when later that summer parsnips and carrots were growing in the bush. Her mother couldn't figure out how they got there.

When she was 10 years old, she made shirts for her two brothers out of flour sacks. Her mother dyed flour sacks to make patch work quilts. Ma loved to sew and make crafts. She never used a pattern, she would just think of how to make something and then try it.

Ma has a natural gift for sewing. She made her own patterns for sewing. In the 1971, at the age of fifty she was asked to teach sewing at the vocational school in Meadow Lake. But first she needed to get certified. She started an upgrading course in Meadow Lake. They began her at Grade Five and in eight months she passed Grade Eight. She then came to Saskatoon to go to the University to get her certificate in sewing so she could teach sewing and upholstery. Ma really enjoyed University because it was all sewing and she was already very skilled at this. She even helped teach classes at the University.

Throughout my visit with Ma she continually brings up her time at

University in the department of Home Economics. She really treasures this time of her life. She really enjoyed University, reading the books and working with the other ladies. The University used her two of her patterns, an incredible accomplishment for a girl who never went to school. One of her teachers at the University tried to encourage her to go east to Toronto and attend a designing school. She would have loved this opportunity. Even though her children were grown, her husband was still in Meadow Lake and longed for her return.

At University, Ma and Mrs. Nelson (roommate) would go to the library every night and take books out. She would write down things she did not know and look them up at night. She learned a lot reading all those books. Mrs. Nelson and her would have books all over the table and a dictionary. Mrs. Nelson had her grade 12, so she would help Ma with the reading and Ma would help her in the class with the sewing.

She has a lot to be proud of. While she was teaching at the vocational school in Meadow Lake, she also ran her own business, "Yvonne's Sewing and Upholstery". Her store was in downtown Meadow Lake. She did this for a 11 years. Ma taught sewing, ran her own business and drove a school bus. She enjoyed keeping busy. When she retired from driving the school bus and

teaching, she continued to do sewing for people. Even today she sews gloves, mitts, moccasins, vests, dresses and outfits for others.

Part Two

Themes

Several themes emerged from analyzing the data I received. The themes that emerged are Family Literacy, Vernacular Literacy, Community Literacy, Cultural Literacy, Critical Literacy, Schooled Literacy, Church Literacy and some cultural issues.

It took a huge effort to remove myself from the data and look at the functions and events of literacy through ethnographic eyes. It was a challenge to describe Métis culture and literacy. The challenge was separating it from Western Canadian culture and literacy. I found this to be a very grey area in terms of differences. My positionality makes it difficult to know what is implicit or explicit in terms of Métis literacy and culture. The part of this whole process that was incredibly wonderful was being able to spend time with my grandmother and listen to her share the wonderful stories and traditions in her life.

Family Literacy

The literacy in Ma's childhood home involved life on the ranch. Their family was very poor and everyone was required to work at the ranch. Ma spoke only French until she was five years old. At this time a hired man and his family moved onto the ranch. The family was an Indian family and the children spoke only Cree. Ma and her family began to speak Cree. French was no longer the only language spoken in the home. Ma's memories of speaking French after that are very few.

Barton states in Local Literacies that, "There are different literacies associated with different domains of life" (Barton, p.7). He also goes on to say that, "People are active in what they do, and literacy practices are purposeful and embedded in broader social goals and cultural practices" (Barton, p.11). Life on the ranch involved the purpose of taking care of the ranch and the family relationships that endured. The function of literacy in these events dealt with the purpose of communicating as a family and as a working unit. *Literacy is a social practice.*

Language was learned at home. In Ma's family there was not a school language, as all of her siblings did not attend school. The schooled literacy that influenced a part of her life history was in regards to her mother and later her

own University experience. I will discuss this later when I take a closer look at schooled literacy.

The socio-linguistic implications of literacy deal with the use of language in the home and on the ranch. The role of gender here does not seem to be placed in strident gender roles within the family, as the welfare of the ranch came first. Gender played a separate role in terms of language. Ma's father as in charge of the operations of the ranch and therefore would control the topics discussed about the ranch and the livestock. Communicative competence was based on the understanding of ranch life and the care that went into the ranch. Besides the ranch literacy there was the garden literacy, house literacy and the social literacy with the other family that worked on the ranch. As James P. Gee stated in Social Linguistic and Literacies: Ideology in Discourse, that "literacy practices involve talk, interaction, values and beliefs" (1996, p.41). The talk shared at the ranch inevitably had shared values and beliefs. In her childhood, my grandmother was able to learn a variety of literacies.

Vernacular literacy practices are essentially ones which are not regulated by the formal rules and procedures of dominant social institutions and which have their origins in everyday life.

(Barton and Hamilton 1998:247)

The literacy of reading and writing, in terms of text manufactured by the

dominant culture, was not part of Ma's everyday life in childhood. She was however, introduced to print through mail that came to the home, a shoe box that had the alphabet on it and a few books that were in the house.

They were so poor, they didn't have any books. When she was seven years old, she and her sisters each got a book for Christmas. The book was filled with stories about children and animals. It was mostly pictures. She enjoyed reading the book and looking at the pictures. It wasn't until she was about 12 or 13 years old she finally understood that the words explained the pictures. Just Ma and her sister Eleanor learned to read. She had a shoe box that had the letters of the English alphabet around it. That is how she learned the alphabet. Around the age of 11 or 12 she learned how to write her name in English, along with the phrase "Merry Christmas".

As an adult, Ma didn't spend time reading with her kids. She had six children and she didn't have time to read to them. She was busy taking care of things on the ranch and she didn't really enjoy reading.. When Ma's father retired from taking care of Clark's cattle, Ma and Pa took over. As well, they had cattle of their own.

I asked Ma what kinds of reading material they kept in the house. "Western Horsemen", "Farm Guide" and "Western Producer" were in the house.

These were magazines that would help with the trade. Pa read these while he could read (he started losing his sight when he was in his 40's, but he team roped until he was 72 years old).

Billy, their eldest, enjoyed reading. He started school when he was nine years old. "He would read what ever he could. He was always picking up things to see what they said, to find out what was on the inside. He was good at learning and skipped grades twice while in school," Ma boasts when she tells of how he started highschool at the age of 13 years. She knows in her heart that she has done a great job in raising someone who did so well in school when she had not been schooled herself.

Today, Ma still states that she does not enjoy reading. She will read to find out information about something or read short stories. In Barton and Hamilton's book Local Literacies, they identify six areas of everyday life where reading and writing is of central importance (1998:247). The six areas are organizing life, personal communication, private leisure, documenting life, sense making and social participation. In viewing the literacy environment in Ma's home I was able to witness these six areas.

The first area of organizing life was evident in the small pieces of paper with names, addresses and phone numbers written on them. Other small

pieces of paper had measurements written on them, for perhaps a pair of moccasins, gloves or another kind of clothing that she had been commissioned to make for someone. There were also pieces of papers with designs and patterns drawn on the. Pieces of paper were piled by the phone and on the kitchen table, along with bills and other correspondence that had come through the mail. Magazines and catalogues were neatly stacked under a table in the living room. There was a collection of small pamphlet-sized books on the kitchen table that explained the many medicinal uses of Garlic and Cayenne Pepper. Ma also has a dining table converted into a sewing table in the living room that collects recently read letters, photo albums and flyers.

Personal communication is evident in the many cards that are around her home. Easter, Mother's Day, and Birthday cards sit on tables and stands. There are also many family pictures cards from family and friends. Ma has photocopied sheets of remedial uses of different herbs. She has also written a few notes that she has posted on the door to let people know where she was if she had stepped out for a moment.

Catalogues and magazines seem to be the primary choice for reading as private leisure. Catalogues and magazines were neatly arranged by the couch. I flipped through the magazines and catalogues to get an idea of what kind of

reading took place. The catalogues were “Avon”, “Mary Kay”, “Mary Maxin” a craft catalogue, “Sears”, and a western clothing catalogue called “Cheyenne Outfitters”. In between these catalogues were Church Bulletins and other flyers. The magazines were old issues of “Canadian Living (May, 1999)”, “Harrowsmith Countryside”, “Better Homes and Gardens (June, 1997)” and “Chatelaine”. Many of the magazines appeared to have never been read. They looked new, but it wasn’t until seeing the date of issue that I discovered their age. The catalogues were well used, with corners folded, the covers were barely hanging on to the staple that held them and the pages were creased. It was easy to see that these catalogues had been looked through several times. I did find a couple of copies of “Reader’s Digest”, in areas where it appeared that reading had taken place.

The records of documenting life were mostly kept in boxes tucked neatly away in cupboards and closets. There were a few photo albums, boxes of photographs and postcards, important records tucked into drawers and other places where Ma always knew where to retrieve them.

Most of Ma’s reading and writing has to deal with the area of sense making. She has kept instruction booklets, medicinal journals, religious booklets and horoscopes, mostly informational text.

The last area, social participation is evident in the newsletters, church bulletins, "Meadow Lake Progress" the community newspaper and community flyers that are found in between magazines, catalogues and personal communication items.

All these areas serve vernacular literacy practices. "They are rooted everyday experience and serve everyday purposes" (Barton, 1998).

Community Literacy

Community literacy entered Ma's life when she helped her father on the ranch. The ranching literacy is a subset of community literacy. Everyone who came to the ranch was familiar with or part of ranching. When they went into town they associated with others who were also part of that community.

Literacy involves how people think, and learn
and change - and how society changes as a
function of the changes in people.

(Wason-Ellam, 2001)

The community literacy in Ma's adulthood was a continuation of the ranching literacy. She also became part of the community of sewing as she began to sew for people outside of her family. The church literacy is also a part of this

literacy. Ma's family was socialized in the Catholic tradition of Christianity and she continues to participate in this religion.

Church Literacy

This church literacy is also part of Métis literacy. The role of the church and Catholic or Anglican faith in the lives of Métis people is very prominent. Ma's house gives evidence to this with crucifixes, icons, religious books and pamphlets that are found around her home. The picture of the "Last Supper" is featured prominently in the kitchen. Church now becomes a social and cultural practice. Denny Taylor explores this socio-cultural perspective in Spin Doctors of Science, (1998). Taylor cites Luis Moll,

"people interact with their words, which are humanized, full of material and symbolic objects, through these mediational means, and their mediation of actions through cultural artifacts, especially language in both its oral and written forms plays a crucial role in the formation and development of human intellectual capacities."

Cultural Literacy

The time that is spent talking is a huge part of cultural literacy. It is through this talk that ideas, values and beliefs are shared. Talk allows for

engaged thinking to take place. This involves the *social constructive theory* that all knowledge and knowledge construction are social acts (Wason-Ellam, 2001).

In the process of talking to one another we are engaging in thought processes. Talk constructs knowledge and meaning (Ward, 2001). Oral history or oral traditions play an important role in Métis literacy. The time spent with my grandmother talking is evidence of how information and knowledge is shared between generations.

Talk at home is naturally occurring everyday.
It is collaborative. Learning happens in the
collaboration.

(Barnes, 1993)

The cultural knowledge that is shared among a group gives evidence to this cultural literacy. Métis literacy has many common threads with Indian or First Nation literacy and French Canadian literacy. Métis literacy is woven with many different kinds of literacies to make its own distinct pattern. This pattern places family, church, work and relationships at a vital place within the culture.

Critical Literacy

Critical thinking is learned. We learn how to be critical of our

environment from home. We learn about others and form opinions. My grandmother had the advantage of not being influenced by schooled literacy directly and therefore was able to hang onto critical literacy. Her experiences led her to learn to be open-minded. Traditional schooling leads us away from this ability to be critical. It makes us look for structure and to no longer always question. The dominant culture causes us to look at other cultures or ways of knowing as inferior. We need to learn how to value these differences and develop our critical literacy. Critical literacy makes us become involved and think about what is going on, instead of being passive readers and writers. Ma grew in an environment where you watched and learned. It was important to not make assumptions, but be open-minded and critically examine what was going on. It was through this critical literacy that different opinions are valued.

Schooled Literacy

The role of schooled literacy was minimal at best in Ma's childhood. Her mother grew up in a convent and learned the dominant culture. In Ma's childhood there was a clash between the schooled literacy that her mother used to teach her children and the vernacular literacy that was used at home.

The vernacular literacy was how the family and the ranch functioned. Only Ma and her sister Eleanor learned to read from their mother. The influence of schooled literacy continued to play a minor role in Ma's life, even when her own children went to school. Schooled literacy was "left at the door" of the home while vernacular and family literacy took over. The schooled literacy was met with excitement when Ma was an adult. Because her schooling was coupled with her desire for sewing she was able to learn and accept schooled literacy as well. She was already well versed in critical literacy as an adult that this continued to be part of her life. The schooled literacy of researching to find answers is something that she continues to do presently. She has admitted to reading when she wants to find information about something. This is definitely a part of schooled literacy that she was able to learn during her time at University.

Cultural Issues

The Métis culture is a distinct culture with Indian origins and western homeland. Métis women have been known for their ability to bead, sew and garden. Métis men are known for their hard work and willingness to work off the land. The influence of religion plays a pivotal role in the life of the Métis.

Families are close-knit. It has always been emphasized that family is the priority, as well as generosity and cooperation. The strength and endurance of the Métis throughout their struggle for survival as a culture has been well documented. All these cultural attributes demonstrate a vibrant culture.

The pragmatic systems of the Métis are not explicit. The Métis have a lot of similarities with their Indian cousins. The implicit rules of not asking questions, of watching and learning, and of following the instructions of elders are felt. Susan Urmston Philips in *The Invisible Culture* (1983), looks at Warm Spring Indians and the implicit rules and pragmatic structures of that community. The communicative practices are analyzed in hopes of understanding how the Warm Springs children differ from their Anglo counterparts. The communicative practices of this community resemble the practices of many Indian and Métis communities. Bourdieu (1986) talks of “cultural capital”. These are the things that enable a person to function within a culture. Their knowledge, attributes, values and even language are a commodity that allows them to find acceptance within that culture. Many minority groups are thought to have a deficiency in the dominant culture because of the large capacity of cultural capital they hold in their own culture.

Cultural capital has played a large role in the life of my grandmother.

Even when she was quite skilled at sewing and this was recognized by the community, the dominant culture required her to have certificates before she could teach and share her knowledge. The cultural capital that she held as a Métis woman was not recognized, instead only the deficit of the dominant literacy was acknowledged

Hegemony is evident in the certification of her sewing and upholstery. It is also evident in her experience with the woman in her class who refused to learn from her, because Ma was a “half-breed”. The dominant culture works on the ideology that minorities are unworthy. Their ways of knowing and cultural literacy are not valued. This ideology exists in how schools are set up to educate only using the dominant literacy and not look at the family literacy from which it’s students come.

Minorities find empowerment through understanding schooled literacy and how their own cultural literacy can function in the dominant culture.

Through out my conversations with Ma, she continually talked of her time at University. This gave her empowerment. As Paulo Freire stated,

Becoming literate is not just a cognitive process of decoding signs, but of living one’s life in relation to others. Literacy becomes empowerment.

Part Three

Summary

I spent a full day visiting with my grandmother in hopes of being able to describe Métis literacy. I left with much more than I had anticipated. In analyzing my field notes from my conversations with my grandmother I found several themes emerge. These themes were discussed through out my course and readings. I have defined Métis literacy in regards to family literacy. For generations Métis families have shared their stories and knowledge around kitchen tables, just as my grandmother and I sat at her kitchen table and visited. And as we sat at the dining table and pored over old photographs stories and knowledge was shared. Family plays a large role in the life of the Métis, as well as church. Family literacy, church literacy form the basic pattern of Métis literacy. Just as sewing is an important part of my grandmother's life, Métis literacy is the stitching together of many literacies.

Conclusion

This has been an incredible experience. The opportunity to spend time with my grandmother was a huge gift. I enjoyed learning from her and being able to share in her stories. My understanding as a Métis woman has changed. This experience has affected my view of myself as a Métis woman and how I see

Métis culture. I now look with new appreciation at the life of my grandmother and mother.

The struggle to survive in the dominant culture is a huge part of Métis literacy and culture. I have had the opportunity to live in both the dominant and Métis culture. I am cognizant of how my life has been built on the sacrifices and gifts of others. The Métis culture is filled with pain and suffering. This pain and suffering has not brought defeat, but instead a strong will to survive.

This experience has taught me that I have not provided my own children with the traditions that I so gladly cherish. I have raised them in the dominant culture without showing them the true nature of the Métis culture, family. The gift that was given to me of being able to walk in two cultures, I will not be able to pass on. I now feel panic and concern. I want to address these issues so that my own children will be well versed in Métis literacy. I feel that I am running against a clock as they continue to grow and learn in the dominant culture.

Through out my life my mother and father have taught me the importance of family. And it is only now that I realize that I have allowed this obligation to slip. The priority for me has been my own family. I have forgotten

about the role that my sister, aunts, uncles and cousins play in my culture. I have allowed myself and in turn my children to become isolated from the best support network that exists. The extended family defines Métis culture, without it we are just part of the western Canadian landscape.

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