

Lifelong Learning (and Unlearning) About Identity and Citizenship Through Creative Writing and Canadian Fiction

Susan M. Holloway
University of Windsor

Patricia A. Gouthro
Mount Saint Vincent University

***Abstract:** This paper explores linkages between notions of identity and citizenship through creative writing and Canadian fiction by drawing upon preliminary research for a Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) study that involves a review of related literature, life history interviews with authors, and additional interviews with “key informants” in the education, policy, and publishing sectors.*

Introduction

Writing and reading are means by which many individuals continue to learn (and unlearn) throughout their lifetime. Fiction provides us with an avenue to explore the world of the imagination, to enter into other character’s lives, and to explore complicated social, political, and cultural issues. An understanding of who we are, as individuals, and as citizens, can be developed through an exploration of creative writing and Canadian fiction.

This paper takes up some of the literature reviewed for a Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) grant to explore connections between citizenship, lifelong learning, and the craft of writing fiction. In addition, it draws upon some of the preliminary interviews conducted with Canadian authors and “key informants” – individuals in the policy, publishing, educational and writing sectors.

The focus of this paper is on the nature of learning and unlearning – how individuals can choose to grow and develop a more sophisticated understanding of their sense of identity both as individuals and as citizens through lifelong learning experiences linked to reading and writing fiction. Considerations around citizenship and identity are also considered in light of the ambiguous relationship between fiction and nation building. From this, we examine the role of fic-

tion as a pedagogical strategy to increase the variety and kinds of student engagement around the topic of citizenship. Examples of teaching and learning activities, drawn from our experiences and research around using literature in education are provided to consider how fiction writing may be used to explore issues of citizenship.

Canadian Nation Building and Pedagogical Implications

There has been an increasing interest in academic circles, as well as by the general public, to better understand the complicated relations of postcolonial societies and the implications of nation building. Much of this attention may have been stimulated by Canada’s own changing status from a colony to an independent nation. Only in 1982 did the British Crown sign over sovereignty in the Constitution Act, thus establishing the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Since that date, the laws of the land have continued to test out this new measure of autonomous authority in the Canadian legal system.

However, it is not only in legal terms that these documents have impacted on forming Canadian identities. There is an appealing quality to nation building, and Canada as a young nation is still in the process of defining and shaping itself against its colonial past. Furthermore, the mythology of a nation, as in the oft-cited “Canadian mosaic,” shows that – as in any society – Canada is in need of narrative, a story (or a collection of stories) to evoke images or momentary glimpses of its imagined collectivity. Canadian writers are crucial to this process. This is not really a question of patriotism, for many writers critique Canadian culture in a less than flattering way. Furthermore, post-colonial theorists such as Brydon (2007) argue that

Canadians are still colonizers of First Nations people. She and other postcolonial critics reject the grand narratives of nation building such as “the railroad built from sea to sea” because it does not take into account narratives of many marginalized, ethnic groups exploited in this process. Similarly, educators argue that accounts of learning often exclude important stories from women, colonized peoples, and other minority groups, and that issues such as gender and class need to be taken up in discourses around citizenship (Bannerji, Mojab & Whitehead, 2001; Butterwick, 1998, Gouthro, 2007).

Nevertheless, through the process of writing the intangible elements of a nation, which is being built/deconstructed, is realized in the resonant phrase of Benedict Anderson (1991), as an “imagined community.” To Anderson, as Williams (2003) points out, we are indebted to for his analysis of nation building in cultural rather than just political terms. This cultural understanding is linked with our sense of Canadian identity. As Williams elaborates: “The advantage of this strategy is twofold: it allows for the transformation rather than the superseding of the previous cultural system, thus eliminating confusions of cause and effect; and it emphasizes the nation-state as a basic cultural formation rather than as a merely political form of consensus” (p. 21). Holden (2000) argues that despite its postcolonial status, an important component of developing a strong Canadian sense of national identity has been the support given to developing a distinct body of Canadian literature.

Homi Bhabha (2003) and other postcolonialists refute Anderson’s reading of “imagined communities” because of concerns with seeing history as static and privileging the English book and role of fiction in communities as an uncontested authority. Within the field of Canadian literature, there have been many debates about stories that are included and those that are left out. For educators, an understanding of these debates augments and complicates notions of Canadian citizenship and learners’ identities.

Definitions of citizenship have become more broadly defined in recent years. Citizenship not only encompasses legal and political realms, it is also informed by a knowledge and understanding of the cultural and historical contexts of our defined nation states. Fiction writers give greater insight into cultural mores. They let us walk in the shoes of others, so to speak, when we enter into the imaginary realm, where our imaginations are engaged in dialogues about lives that may persuade us to feel what it is to be part of or alienated from the communities that make up Canada and our individual relations with this country.

Looking at the work of Canadian authors engaged in writing fiction encourages educators to examine their own assumptions of what constitutes a nation within the context of globalization. Part of the “unlearning” we undergo is to hold up our own personal histories of lived experiences in the Canadian context as citizens and compare that to larger collective experiences explored through literary narratives.

One of the authors we interviewed in our research noted that whenever a story is written, the author determines “who will have the microphone.” The story is always different, depending upon who tells it. Learning is often linked with issues of identity. Therefore, one of the challenges of understanding our notions of Canadian identity is to allow different voices, which in the past may not have always had the opportunity to be heard, to share their stories with others. To “unlearn” a narrow definition of citizenship requires taking some risks. These risks might involve reading ourselves into new ways of thinking about how individuals function in their larger communities by examining the mechanisms of power at play in the communities as they are shaped in fictional narrative. From this, critical pedagogical strategies may be developed to explore a deeper and more complex understanding of citizenship.

Characteristics of Canadian Fiction Writing

Many Canadian novels deal with cultural and historical contexts specific to our country. *Obasan* by Joy Kogawa, for example, tells the story of the Japanese internment camps on the west coast during and after World War II. In a retrospective narrative that moves between the present life of adult Naomi Nakane, and through her eyes as a five-year old girl living through the displacement, the story is told as a personal narrative, but it is also juxtaposed with historical government documents about this oft-forgotten part of Canadian history. Suzette Mayr’s novels grapple with questions of what it means to be first, second, or third generation Canadian, especially when that identity also intersects with gender, race, and ability. Even writers such as Rohinton Mistry, Shyam Selvadurai, or Michael Ondaatje whose novels tend to be set in other countries, are still works of Canadian fiction. These authors’ writings emphasize what it means to live in a contemporary, globalized world, which may be connected to discussions around Canadian identity and global citizenship. Their explorations of – for example, Sri Lankan or Bombay societies – when written from their homes in Toronto, gives us insights into other cultures. Moreover, these stories also broaden the perspectives within our own culture of what it

means to live in the hyphenated spaces of being Indo-Canadian, African-Canadian, or Chinese-Canadian with rich histories from several cultural traditions.

Perhaps one of the unique features of Canadian literature is the focus on place. Much in the same way the geo-political terrain plays out in the nation's politics, so does geography take on importance in fiction. Although physically large, our populated areas are relatively small compared to many countries. This may be a reason why in writing about the location they know best, Canadian authors develop very detailed pictures of the landscapes that are often easily recognizable. These detailed portraits of place contribute to Canada's collective imagining of what it means to be a citizen in this country. Even if you haven't been to Newfoundland or Cape Breton, reading Joan Clark's or Alistair Macleod's fiction vividly depicts aspects of those regional parts of Canada. The experiences of living in an east coast fishing village or in a small city in the prairies are central to shaping Canadian narratives. Robert Kroetsch contends "the human response to this landscape is so new and ill-defined and complex that our writers come back, uneasily, but compulsively, to landscape writing" (1989, p. 5). We write and read our way into inventing our Canadian identities. We read Canadian literature because we see characters who have grown up in our own setting, and who have been raised in this specific cultural context. In CanLit, we either recognize something of ourselves, or we are invited to explore through the fiction a myriad of images that are narratives of what it is to be Canadian, even if those images may not come from our own repertoire of personal experiences. Through fiction we learn much about our country, our sense of place, and our sense of identity. We are also encouraged to consider the complexity of living within a nation that is diverse in both its geography and its people.

Citizenship, Identity and Pedagogy

Mark Bracher develops a radical pedagogical approach to argue that the most effective way to address many social problems such as racism, violence and intolerance, is through helping learners to develop "strong, resilient identities" (2006, p. XII). We believe that one of the ways that educators may be able to support identity development is through fostering learning that encourages the capacity for critical reflection and understanding to promote both individual and social growth. Reflecting on the concept of citizenship is one way in which learners can take up issues of identity and inclusion, as well as explore so-

cial-structural considerations within both national and global contexts.

In her debate with Axel Honneth, Nancy Fraser (2003) argues that to address social issues of injustice and inequality, concerns around both identity and social structures have to be addressed to critically explore notions of redistribution and recognition. Redistribution involves considering economic, political and social structures and policies that impact upon all citizens' lives, while recognition takes up the importance of acknowledging differences in backgrounds and positionality. Educators need to address how an individual sense of identity can have important consequences for social participation and collective decision making.

Bracher defines the notion of identity as "having a sense of oneself as a force that matters in the world involves the experience of several distinct qualities, including continuity, consistency, agency, distinction, belonging and meaning" (2006, p. 6). Building on this notion of identity construction as being centrally linked with fostering socially ameliorative educational strategies, it may be that using creative ways to enhance learning and unlearning, such as through reading and the craft of writing fiction, may be an effective means of fostering active, engaged, and socially responsible citizenship.

Hunt & West (2009) argue that acknowledging complicated notions of identity and how identity evolves in different contexts may be linked with a deeper understanding of adult learning processes. They note that activities such as arts-based inquiry and creative writing may help learners approach issues that they find confusing or troubling in new ways. O'Rourke also raises questions about identity issues for educators who teach creative writing, pointing out the importance of reflexive learning around the role of educators who mentor students in creative writing contexts. Within the broader fields of adult education and lifelong learning, there are numerous pedagogical strategies that can be developed to connect learning around fiction writing with learning about issues of citizenship.

Critical Pedagogy, Fiction Writing and Citizenship

While there are many different pedagogical strategies educators can draw upon that use Canadian fiction to explore notions of citizenship with learners, it is essential that these teaching and learning activities are taken up using a critical pedagogical approach. Otherwise, there is a danger that instead of engaging in a critical learning context informed by theory and a

sophisticated understanding of how power shapes our cultures and identities, existing prejudices and biases may simply be reinforced. Learning around complicated issues such as citizenship entails understanding broader social, political, economic and cultural concerns that shape both literary and academic discourses as well as our individual sense of identity. Drawing upon our own experiences as educators, we consider several pedagogical activities that could be used within adult learning contexts to explore issues around citizenship and Canadian identity.

Bringing fiction into any classroom or learning context may challenge assumptions about stereotypes. This can be done through literary analysis or creative writing. One strategy that works well involves critiquing common stereotypes by observing the characteristics assigned to a persona in the studied literature. These characteristics include physical, emotional, and socio-economic attributes. What is inferred in the text through tone or minimalist details are just as important as what the narrator explicitly states. What is left out of the narrative framework or the bias inherent to the particular narrative voice is also taken into account. Learners work through the subtleties of characterization to critique to what extent a stereotype has been generated. This analysis is all put into the list. Next, they come up with an alternative list of specific characteristics in which they qualify existing knowledge they already have about the character. Students create new characteristics and metaphors to undermine stereotypical representations. Using the alternative list, learners rewrite a critical scene from the novel, or give the character dialogue that wasn't in the original piece. The purpose of this exercise is to examine the assumptions underlying fictional texts, which often also represent normative practices in every day life. On the other hand, sometimes reading a novel, students find it jarring when characters do not conform to the image of what they think they should be. In the course of this exercise, students may "unlearn" their own underlying prejudices that have influenced their expectations of how the novel should develop, thus changing their perceptions around how particular identities should be constructed.

Drawing upon strategies used by educators within the school system, a compelling way to engage adult learners in questions of what Canadian citizenship means to them is through reading a novel together with a group using Reader Response logs. Reader Response is a literary theory that argues the reader is involved actively in the process of interpretation and production of the text (Rosenblatt, 1969). Readers bring their own personal experiences to reading,

which helps to construct meaning. In Reader Response logs, students are asked to keep a running journal in which they respond to the novel they are reading. They are asked to focus only on parts of the novel that stand out for them or perhaps that they find puzzling. In the journal, learners offer their personal opinion, connect events to their own lives, anticipate what might come, and ask questions to help clarify the issues in the novel. The instructor takes in these journals at various points to respond to some of the comments or to help find common threads as a basis for group discussions. These journal responses could also be paired with other non-fiction readings. For example, if the novel deals with issues of how communities document and recall past events, local newspaper stories which do this could be compared and contrasted with the novel as a way to explore citizenship and the role of memory in how we define ourselves in the present.

In addition to studying published Canadian fiction, fostering creative writing is another way to support adult learning opportunities that may be linked with exploring citizenship. Several of the key informants interviewed for this study were involved in different programs to encourage the development of Canadian writers, many of whom came from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. These programs are important because they provide support at a systemic level for new writers through mentorship, publication know-how, and writing communities. By encouraging emerging writers from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, the complexities of living in a society that celebrates diversity, and yet one that is also working through the tensions of change and cultural awareness, finds voice in Canadian fiction. The scope and diversity of our lived human experiences is best understood when wrought through artistic representations. Definitions of citizenry undergo expansion when fiction becomes part of the criteria for exploring how we construct our social identities, thus learning (and unlearning) our definitions of what it means to be Canadian.

Implications for Policies and Practices in Adult Learning

Fiction writing and citizenship share a central concern with questions of ethics. Fiction takes up ethical dilemmas and how humans interact and respond to these problems in various ways. Adult learners are often surprised at their own reactions to reading and discussing literature because it may stimulate them to think more carefully about their own personal values. Citizenship is defined more broadly than just an inter-

est in the legal and political functions of a society. At the heart of citizenship is also an exploration of what are the best ethical decisions to shape a society and protect individual rights. Exploring fiction gives citizens the opportunity to introspectively explore the socially constructed limitations on their own thinking

in terms of how they assess moral and ethical questions. As adult educators, we can draw upon creative writing and Canadian fiction using various pedagogical strategies to critically engage learners as they explore their understanding of notions of citizenship.

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