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Patricia A. Gouthro
Mount Saint Vincent University

Susan M. Holloway
University of Windsor

Erin J. Careless
Mount Saint Vincent University

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Becoming a Canadian Writer: Identity, Fiction Writing and Learning in Community

Patricia A. Gouthro
Mount Saint Vincent University

Susan M. Holloway
University of Windsor

Erin J. Careless
Mount Saint Vincent University

Abstract: This paper draws upon research from a Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada study that looks at lifelong learning, citizenship, and fiction writing, to explore how individuals might learn to become Canadian fiction writers. The paper considers how the identity of becoming a writer may be shaped by involvement in writing communities. It explores issues pertaining to identity as well as challenges and supports, with regards to becoming a Canadian writer. The paper concludes by considering how learning in connection to fiction writing may help adult educators to reflect upon issues of identity, diversity, and citizenship.

Introduction

If we are to believe that engaging in lifelong learning shapes both individual and social growth and development, then the importance of identity cannot be overlooked. This paper draws upon research from a Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) study that looks at lifelong learning, citizenship, and fiction writing, to explore how individuals might learn to become fiction writers in Canada. Beginning with a brief overview of literature, the paper considers how the identity of becoming a writer may be shaped by involvement in a writing community, and also considers some of the issues of globalization and diversity in shaping identity with regards to understanding citizenship. It then provides a brief overview of the study and some of the findings, looking at issues pertaining to identity as well as challenges and supports, with regards to becoming a Canadian writer. The paper concludes by considering the learning processes involved in becoming a Canadian writer, and how learning in connection to fiction writing may help adult educators to reflect upon important issues relating to identity, diversity, and citizenship.

Literature Review

The identity of being a Canadian writer is potentially important for several reasons. Some fiction authors make their livelihood by writing and work is a central component of identity (Billett, 2010). In Maslow's terms, becoming a successfully published author may be a form of self-actualization, as writers attain an important personal goal. Finally, fiction writing is also linked to identity with regards to citizenship.

Allan & Lewis (2006) suggest that participation in different communities may impact on the development of one's identity. Given this, communities centred around writing may be considered as avenues for growth around learning and identity. For example, Maher, Seton, McMullan, Fitzgerald, Otsuzi & Lee (2008) discuss the writing group that they developed as

doctoral candidates who worked collaboratively to build their skills and provide support to one another through the dissertation process during which time they learned to “shape their scholarly identities as writers” (p. 174). In the same way, fiction writers may develop their sense of identity as writers by participating within a community that focuses on the importance of this work.

In an increasingly globalized world, what it means to be a “Canadian writer” is not always easy to discern. In considering how the concept of postcolonialism is a contested one that challenges us to reflect critically upon our experiences within education and the broader societies in which we live, travel, and work, Preece (2008) notes that “we are all increasingly hybrids of our complex identities”(p. 279). Through fiction, issues pertaining to diversity and citizenship may be explored. In a paper looking at the use of poetry as a means to foster unique learning opportunities, Wiseman (2011) notes that writing that takes up issues pertaining to identity around race, culture or gender issues is frequently not supported in formal schooling. Yet, writers often explore contentious issues around their own and their characters’ sense of identity, raising important concerns regarding citizenship in an increasingly diverse and global world. Considering how to foster writing communities that promote opportunities for learning around identity may provide valuable opportunities for adult learning experiences.

The Research Study

This study involves life history interviews with over thirty traditionally published authors in three areas: literary, crime fiction, and Young Adult (YA) and children’s literature. In the context of a life history interview, the participants were asked to discuss various factors and influences that may have shaped their learning trajectory as writers including influences from work, family, schooling, and the writing community. In addition, shorter, semi-structured interviews were conducted with over a dozen key informants in government, education, and the not-for-profit sector who are involved in programs connected to fiction writing. A number of interviews with authors and key informants in the UK and US are also included for comparative purposes, although within this paper, the focus is on responses from Canadian participants.

Authors were asked to reveal their identities, although they were given the option to review and revise their transcripts and could request that certain sections be kept confidential, so that if quotes were used from those sections then they would not be attributed to them. Key informants were given these same options, and could also choose complete confidentiality, where identifying features about them and their organizations would be screened out. Initial coding was determined by some of the topics in the questions such as family, school experiences, and so forth. Additional themes emerged as the research team reviewed and compared the data (Marshall & Rossman, 2011), such as the significance of writing communities.

To present the results we begin with one example of an author, Nino Ricci, that illustrates some of the issues that becoming a writer within Canada might entail. We then move into a discussion of three themes that emerged from an analysis of the data; Canadian Identity, Challenges and Supports in Canadian Publishing, and Writing Communities.

Telling a Canadian Story: Nino Ricci

In this short paper, we can only provide a few examples, but one writer whose experiences speak to the complex factors that shape the story of a Canadian writer is Nino Ricci, a literary author who has twice won the Governor General's Award for his novels. Here he talks about the impetus to become a writer and notes that his parents initially were not enthused about their son's decision to pursue a career first in doing international aid work, and then in deciding to become a writer:

I was kind of shocked at how upset they were at my decision to be a writer. I guess I thought they wouldn't care that much about what I did, but I was surprised at how little value they put in writing; I valued it a lot. I think it was something they didn't really understand. I thought they wanted me to get a job that made a lot of money as opposed to something that was more difficult. They didn't see sufficient evidence from me that I knew what I wanted to do with my life and that I was capable of actually surviving as an adult. For many years they were unhappy.

After struggling for financial security as immigrants to Canada, they had difficulty understanding why Nino would choose a career path that was unlikely to be financially successful, although they eventually took great pride in their son's choice of career:

When my second book came out, he [his father] helped to organize a tour and came to the readings. In fact, after one of the readings he got up on stage unannounced and started talking about how he had never supported me in my writing when I was younger, and that he regretted it now. He said that if people in the audience had children who wanted to go into the arts, they should be encouraged. For me that was a real vindication; the kind of cathartic moment that you hope for with a parent.

Nino reflects upon his experiences in university around taking writing courses:

I think there's a limited amount of value you can get from workshop experience, but the importance of that environment is that you feel you are in a community of people who value what you're doing.

This kind of support is critical in encouraging individuals to persist in developing the craft of writing. In terms of developing a successful career, Nino Ricci also discusses the value of support from the Canada Council, without which there may not be a strong culture of Canadian fiction and voices:

One of the things that Canada Council said was that culture is really important. No one had been saying that. The tradition in Canada was the distrust of culture. It's important how we think about ourselves and becoming a great nation. I think we needed to be able to say, 'It's meaningful to read a Canadian book. Canadian books can actually be good'. So there has

been a cumulative effect, but I do think it's a fairly fragile ecosystem; it's easy to crumble.

In order for these Canadian stories to survive and flourish, there needs to be a support system providing opportunities for those who wish to contribute to this culture of Canadian fiction. The next sections look at some of the supports and challenges in becoming a Canadian writer.

Canadian Identity

Over the last couple of decades, there has been increasing recognition for the diverse range of writers that shape Canada's literary landscape (Holden, 2000). But becoming a Canadian writer is not always linked initially to a strong sense of national identity. Poet and writer Fred Wah talks about his early experiences where "there was kind of a Canadian-American friction that started in the late 60s and went through the 70s at least. But I wasn't denying any kind of Canadian identity; I wasn't even thinking of any national identity". Yet Wah's (1996) book, *Diamond Grill*, is a uniquely Canadian bricolage that represents historical tensions, cultural pride, and insights into the "hybrid identities" that Preece alludes to as Wah develops a partially fictionalized account that draws upon some of his experiences in being raised as a Japanese-Canadian during the post-WWII era in a small Canadian town in British Columbia.

A number of other Canadian authors choose specifically to locate their books outside of Canada, but they argue that this does not make them any less Canadian. Susanna Kearsley discusses this issue as her stories have English roots:

My choice of characters has always been by what the book needs, and I don't think I'm any less of a Canadian because I write about British people. Just as I don't think a British person writing about Canadian characters will be any less British. I don't like being constrained in what I want to write about. I don't like someone telling me I'm not Canadian if I don't set part of the book within Canada. That to me is irrelevant. It's where I was born; where I was raised. The country I consider home makes me what I am, certainly not my subject matter. If I had to be published only by a Canadian publisher I'd be out of luck.

Others believe that an important aspect of their work as Canadian writers is the way that they can take up stories located within their own country. Garry Ryan talks about his novel that is set in Calgary, Alberta:

I think people say that they want to read about some place like New York or Venice or LA, or Toronto, London. Then I thought, Why not Calgary? And I think I must have run into someone somewhere who'd said, 'You can't write about Calgary or no one will want to read about Calgary'. That's why. I'm kind of bloody-minded like that... I guess there's a part of me that just likes to prove people wrong.

Gary was fortunate in having a regional publisher decide to publish his book that receives funding support from the Canadian government, yet one of the issues that became apparent in

this research study is that there are a number of difficulties and challenges that Canadians might face in getting their books published and distributed. The next section explores some of these concerns.

Challenges and Supports in Canadian Publishing

Louise Penny, whose most recent book, *The Beautiful Mystery*, ranked number two on the *New York Times* Bestseller list, explains that she ended up with a British publisher after being rejected within Canada:

It was a Canadian editor who had it for six months and said no; it was a Canadian agent who had it for a year exclusively and said no... It wasn't Americans or the British, it was the Canadians who said, 'Nobody would be interested in a mystery set in Canada'.

The authors who are successful in obtaining a Canadian publisher find that it is difficult to sell enough books to make any money through their writing because the Canadian market is so small. Crime fiction writer Linwood Barclay talks about his feelings around citizenship and his novels:

I love Canada and I feel very nationalistic about it here. But I'm not writing an archetype of a Canadian novel, so I don't come to the process thinking, 'This must be a Canadian novel'. That's not a part of what I'm doing. I'm trying to write the best thriller I can; the most engaging, exciting, thriller that I can. And I'm not ashamed to say I'd like to sell as many copies as I can; sometimes setting stories in the US helps with that.

At the same time, Gina McMurchy-Barber, a Canadian children's author explains:

The American publisher I spoke to said, 'If you want to make a living from your writing, there's no reason that you shouldn't. There's a lot of work goes into writing a book, so you should want to make a living at what you're doing'. If you get with an American publisher, there's more possibility of actually making a living at your writing.

She adds, however:

I'm glad to be with a Canadian publisher though, and it's probably what brought me into focus for the Governor General's Award... But if I needed to make a living from my writing, then I'd say being published by an American publisher would make that more of a possibility.

The financial aid provided by the Canadian government to publishers as well as the recognition given to Canadian authors through prizes such as the Giller or Governor General's Award are important supports for Canadian writers. This support is especially important in recent years, where globalization and changes in technology have had dramatic effects on the publishing industry. Many bookstores in Canada have closed their doors due to a lack of sales in paper

format, making it even more challenging for publishing houses to survive. One key informant discusses the challenges that both publishers and writers face with

the evaporating retail market. Every week a couple of independent book stores close. Indigo, which is our big chain of course, has recently decided to reduce their inventory to less than 50 percent books now... so there's no place to get books out there in front of people's eyes.

To address these challenges, it is important consider practical supports for Canadians, to help them establish viable writing careers (even though many authors have to also work at other forms of paid employment).

When asked about how writers fit into the fabric of Canadian society, a number of authors discussed the importance of making the work of writers more visible through programs, for example, like Writers in the Schools. These programs provide important financial and promotional supports for writers, but they also serve an educational purpose around learning and citizenship. Young adult (YA) author Christine Walde says:

I think writers visiting schools is critically important. Having them come into the classrooms, do readings, have kids ask them questions ... I think is really important. Two weeks ago I did a book camp here in London. I was at the London public library, and I had two groups of 20 kids ranging in age from nine to 16; and some of them had heard of me and others had not. But just to be there to read to them and have them ask questions about writing and being a writer I think was really important because it demystified a lot... and it serves a purpose. It demystifies things, but it also helps to solidify a vision, I guess, for them or add to a vision of what a Canadian writer or Canadian writing is.

Learning to Write Through Community

While some of the writers, more so men than women, indicated that much of their learning was an isolated process, others valued the opportunity to engage with other writers and participate in the writing community. Gina McMurchy-Barber talks about the importance of these groups during the beginning of her career:

I had a five year old and a brand new baby at that point, and I was working full time. But being in the writing community really helped... Having that community made me feel connected to it, even though I wasn't writing much. There was this sort of acknowledgement that one day when my kids didn't need me so much I would be freer to do this. So writing courses and having a writing group were really important at that stage of my life.

Several of the writers discussed the importance of being able to take courses and be mentored by other Canadian authors to help them develop their own craft of writing. After being involved in writing groups and taking several courses, mystery writer Susan Calder talked about the valuable support she received from a highly acknowledged Canadian author:

With this novel *Deadly Fall* that I wrote, I had done three drafts on my own. At a certain point I signed up for a correspondence course and the instructor was Lawrence Hill who wrote *The Book of Negroes*. I did a one-on-one mentorship program with him for a year.

In addition, a number of writers talked about the benefits of conferences and writers' festivals, which allowed them to raise the profile of their work and engage with other authors. Over the last couple of decades, the demographics of those who participate in the writing community has started to change, as Nate Crawford from the Nova Scotia Writer's Federation explains:

There are new Canadians coming here who are not necessarily very proficient in speaking or writing English. It's wonderful to see how they develop their sense of place and themselves by trying this; trying to write. That's great, and a lot of those people submit to the competition so we get to see what they're writing. At the same time, however, the diverse peoples already in Nova Scotia – the French community and First Nations community – I think it's a nice little microcosmic mirror about those communities.

Nate Crawford notes that in the past these groups were not as active in the Writer's Federation, and they were not give as much recognition, but this shift towards broadening participation is a positive aspect that he sees in the evolving community of writers in Nova Scotia.

Implications for Adult Education

Authors take up issues around diversity when they reflect upon their own experiences in becoming writers, and the experiences of their characters often reflect the hyphenated and sometimes marginalized identities that are part of the Canadian literary terrain. A better understanding of cultural institutional supports and informal learning environments in which fiction writers in Canada learn their craft gives insight into one important form of adult learning that has a wide influence on contributing to what is our Canadian "voice." Many of the organizations that help writers learn their craft are outside of formal education (writers' federations, publishing houses, community mentoring programs). Understanding, then, how adults access and use the wide array of larger community supports to foster their craft may serve to reveal facets of their lifelong learning endeavours. In addition, fiction itself, and an analysis of how fiction writers learn their craft, provides adult educators with a lens to explore complex issues that shape many Canadians' learning experiences around citizenship and identity.

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