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MAIS 601: Making Sense of Theory

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Focus Area Reflection: Writing the Self and Reconciliation

For many non-Indigenous Canadians wanting to commit to a process of reconciliation, the desire to do the right thing is coupled with anxiety over getting the right thing, wrong. There are a multitude of steps to truth and reconciliation, many acts, both public and private, that we as non-Indigenous people must undertake to build that bridge to justice. According to Reinekke Lengelle, Charity Jardine and Charlene Bonner, a reflective writing practice can help us unlearn the overt and covert messages of inadequacy and inequality (82). Their article, “Writing the Self for Reconciliation and Global Citizenship: The Inner Dialogue and Creative Voices for Healing” provides information about self-reflective writing practices that incorporate the dialogical self to heal the damaging messages from society that are enmeshed with our own narratives. By writing the self, we can escape our “I-positions,” or what the authors call, “I-prisons” of negative identity (82). In “Writing the Self for Reconciliation and Global Citizenship,” the authors state that by undergoing such reflective writing practices, we can practice an interdisciplinary approach to reconciliation, by fusing psychology with the fields of education and creative writing. For me, as

a writing and new media student, this article was insightful and thought-provoking at an inner, personal level as well as an outer, social one.

To begin, I have an immediate and recent connection to the article. I had the opportunity to briefly “meet” Dr. Lengelle just last week since I volunteer as a copyeditor for Athabasca University’s *Journal of Integrated Studies*. Granted, it was a Microsoft Teams meeting, and Dr. Lengelle, who was the journal’s faculty advisor, is transitioning from that role, so her virtual visit with the journal team was short and sweet. However, I will be taking Dr. Lengelle’s Writing the Self course come January, and I am looking forward to this opportunity. In my year and a half of graduate studies, this was the first assigned reading where I “knew” one of the authors and, not only that, will also have a chance to study with them, so those elements added another layer of relevancy and meaning to my learning journey.

On another level, I related to the conversation around reconciliation in the education system in “Writing the Self for Reconciliation and Global Citizenship.” For many years, I worked as a public-school educational assistant (EA), so I guess you could say I was in the field of education. An EA’s position is sort of complex and many people have an unclear idea as to what an EA does at a school. We are not teachers, but we do teach students in a more unconventional way. Yet, I always felt uncomfortable if I was referred to as a “teacher.” EAs have to be flexible and adapt any given lesson on the fly to make it more accessible for the students we support. We often must teach ourselves concepts in the curriculum, so we can present the learning in a way that offers students the most success. We provide support for both students and teachers in the classroom. We are responsible for supervision, health care, first aid, crisis prevention and many more areas within a school setting. We might “teach” in the general

sense of the word, but we are not teachers. I see EAs as frontline workers in an educational hierarchy. We often have minimal time and resources with which to do our job.

As an EA for over ten years, I was assigned to about ten students one-on-one. Over half of those assigned students had Indigenous ancestry, but I am a first-generation white Canadian. As an EA, I met many incredible Indigenous Support Workers and had the opportunity to participate in many enriching culture and knowledge-sharing activities, but I was all too aware that I did not share the same ancestry and history as some of the students I worked with, and I did not have the learning or skills to help support comprehensive meaning making within their educational experience. How could I incorporate culturally sensitive material when I am not Indigenous, and when, as an employee who exists on the bottom rung of the “working in education” ladder, I am not even *allowed* to implement curriculum? As an EA, I was taught to stay in my lane. “Knowledge production and transfer in education are still focused primarily on reproductive learning, and not individual; education is still monological” (83). I believe this quote from the Lengelle et al. article to be largely true; however, it is a complex issue, and with so many diverse needs found within any given Canadian classroom, time and resources are required to create individualized meaning-making happen. We really need to make reconciliation and inclusivity priorities in the Canadian education system, no excuses.

Lengelle et al. state:

Within academic institutions, there is much discussion about incorporating Indigenous perspectives and histories into all levels of education. However, as we argue here, providing the factual histories and listening to the stories of others is only a starting point for true reconciliation and a cultural shift—‘personal action’ must include an inner shift” (85).

I appreciate this direction toward an inner shift because, although I am not an EA anymore, this is something I have within my power to do no matter what my career.

In a recent course of mine, MAIS 602: Doing Interdisciplinary Research, I learned about the concept of positionality in scholarly work. Positionality requires scholars to address their experiences and who they are in their academic writing; the scholarly voice of impartial authority is in many ways a pretense since we all bring our personal and social standing into our work, knowingly and unknowingly. And, as previously mentioned, I-positions can quickly become I-prisons if we are not aware of them. I related to what Charity Jardine shared about her position as a student while getting her degree. “In my undergrad years, I rarely had an opportunity for personal writing, I was allowed to share my opinion and to provide evidence for it or reproduce others’ thoughts” (88). As a graduate student, I struggle to identify myself as someone worthy of expressing my knowledge and learning: I feel I need permission to do so, just as when I was an undergrad. The concepts of situatedness and reflexivity (Lammes, 145) have given me the freedom to acknowledge that I might not have all the answers, but I am still capable of sharing knowledge. The concept of positionality makes me aware of my social location (Soedirgo & Glas). I feel that a writing-the-self process can further enhance my understanding of my positionality, reflexivity and situatedness, so I can heal from damaging (to myself and others) identity messaging in my dialogical self. In terms of reconciliation, writing the self could reveal the work I need to do, and help me discover the tools I need to build the bridge to supporting Indigenous truth.

Works Cited

- Lammes, Sybille. "Section 3: Engaging and Distributing." *Routledge Handbook of Interdisciplinary Research Methods*, edited by Lury, Celia, et al., E-book, Routledge, London; New York, 2018, pp. 145–151.
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- Soedirgo, Jessica, and Aarie Glas. "Toward Active Reflexivity: Positionality and Practice in the Production of Knowledge." *PS: Political Science & Politics*, vol. 53, no. 3, 2020, pp. 527–531, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1049096519002233>.