

Commentary

Treaties That Dominate and Literacy That Empowers? I Wish It Was All in Ojibwemowin

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In considering literacy, we take a step back to ask: literacy in which language? And what is the purpose and measure of achievement? Although not in disagreement with the Bialostok and Whitman article in this issue, we place English literacy as a part of the continuing drive to colonize and assimilate indigenous peoples. Local indigenous control of literacy efforts must largely conform to state educational standards, and thus are not completely liberatory. Further, the literacy efforts lauded by Bialostok and Whitman demonstrate a high potential for social disruption through individualization of learners and alienation of local authority. Although there are no simple solutions, seeing the complexity of working in indigenous communities through a postmodern lens of shifting meanings and identities within their specific historical, social, and economic circumstances can be a helpful starting point. [Indigenous language revitalization, Indigenous language and literacy, cultural-based education, culture, and tribal schooling]

Speaking as scholars involved with indigenous-language preservation in response to Bialostok and Whitman, we want to add these comments to “Indigenous peoples, literacy, and modernity.” The discourse of democracy, including “individuality, freedom, agency, and human rights,” is not new to indigenous nations of America; neither is the struggle to continue our self-determination. Are some of the new federally driven scripted literacy programs only training indigenous people to take a place in late-modern capitalism? Are literacy efforts organized by indigenous people more suited to their own needs? In response to these questions we ask, was not the intention of treaties always the domination of indigenous nations and the subjugation of specific people to capitalism? Is achievement of literacy in the colonial language empowering? Or is a better strategy to revitalize the indigenous language? A focus on English literacy as an academic priority is derived from market-driven universities—and it must be seen as only one small part of an overall strategy for decolonization, a strategy of prioritizing indigenous-language revitalization while mastering English.

PART 1: Putting English in Its Place

Anthropology has been inextricably linked with colonizing literacy projects: U.S. schooling under the guise of democracy (and meritocracy) has always been linked to exploitation of indigenous land and labor (Grande 2004). Well-meaning teachers carry out programs that ring of good intentions while they reek of institutional racism.

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There is not an Indian pupil whose tuition and maintenance is paid for by the United States Government who is permitted to study any other language than our own vernacular—the language of the greatest, most powerful, and enterprising nationalities beneath the sun. The English language as taught in America is good enough for all her people of all races.

—J. D. C. Atkins, Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 1886

What is missing from this discussion is any mention of tribal sovereignty, or self-determination at any level beyond the “empowered,” technologically savvy individual. But, rather than dwell on further romanticized notions of sovereignty in which treaties are pointed at as evidence of a nation-to-nation relationship between the colonized and the colonizers, we would like to point out that treaties are, in fact, evidence of an immediate intent to dominate indigenous peoples. Treaties remain the basis of the relationship between tribes and the United States. When the U.S. government recognized tribes as sovereigns through treaties, they were following in the footsteps of European nations that had done the same thing.

Treaties were agreements made with tribes to cede land ownership (although not necessarily land usage) to non-Indians in exchange for protections of their general welfare, health, and education. Thus, treaties were plans for the future made with the best interests of the tribe in mind in the face of a major threat. However, although the goals may have been agreed on—welfare, health, and education—the underlying intentions were vastly different. While tribes sought to retain as much as possible, the government used the provisions to take more and more. Welfare provisions were aimed to create economic dependence as massive land expropriations destroyed subsistence practices (Dillingham 1999; Reitze and Reitze 1975). Health provisions were used to control tribes physically, initially feeding racist science aimed at proving the supposed “natural” superiority of Europeans, as well as to provide practice subjects for training surgeons by removing from indigenous people the “unnecessary” organs of tonsils, appendices, and uteruses (Smith 2005). Education provisions were used to assimilate the tribes out of their cultures and into the mainstream of U.S. society (Pfister 2004). To that end, boarding schools were established to separate children as much as possible from their homes and cultures (Adams 1988; Lomawaima 1995). There was nothing “tacit” about these designs (Bialostok and Whitman this issue).

It was always known that an important front in the war for assimilation was language. First imagined as a way to manage tribes by making them into a uniform mass able to receive consistent and formulaic Federal Indian Policy, the goal was full incorporation into U.S. life. Informing this push was the desire to destroy the national identities of tribes, thereby eliminating the basis for treaties as agreements between sovereign nations. An erasure of linguistic distinctiveness, it was believed, would lead to complete incorporation into U.S. life, including, then, the agrarian economy, and, now, the service economy. Indians would then be completely subject to the domination by the majority system of capitalistic competition (Pfister 2004; Thornton 2002).

... their barbarous dialect should be blotted out and the English language should be substituted.
 ... The object of greatest solicitude should be to break down the prejudices of tribe among the Indians; to blot out the boundary lines, which divide them into distinct nations, and fuse them into one homogenous mass. Uniformity of language will do this—nothing else will.

—from the 1868 Report of the Peace Commission

All of this should sound familiar. Pressures to mainstream children, women, minorities, immigrants, and anyone else outside the norm in the United States under the guise of patriotic unity—with those who refuse assimilation and conformity labeled “un-American”—has been a repeated theme in U.S. history. This rings through in the efforts against Ebonics, the English Only movement, and in such legislation as the USA Patriot Act or the several bills proposed to remove state funding to schools whose curriculum taught anything other than that the “United States is the greatest, strongest nation on Earth.” The political connections between language and identity have been known for a long time and long put into official practice. But so too has resistance to these policies, resistance that reflects a critical awareness of the connection between language and identity, and recognition of the larger pressure for tribes to give up not just their lands and languages, but to give up their whole way of life—economic, political, and spiritual.

If the Great Spirit had desired me to be a white man he would have made me so in the first place. He put in your heart certain wishes and plans; in my heart he put other and different desires. Each man is good in the sight of the Great Spirit.

It is not necessary that eagles should be crows.

—Sitting Bull, Teton Sioux

Such sentiments say more than education is not necessary to “be Spokane” (Bialostok and Whitman this issue). These statements illustrate a consciousness of the connections between ideas and knowledge, on the one hand, and social practices and responsibilities, on the other hand. Attention to the social underpinnings of learning is left wanting in this article. What does it mean to families when, for example, a child can teach his or her parent how to speak their language? The “empowerment” of the child through education and technology both individualizes the child, setting him or her apart from the parent, but also negates familial and larger social networks of generational authority and expertise. This further entrenches state authority over indigenous peoples by portraying education as the only way to overcome the limitations of reservation life; this entails a break with their indigenous ancestry.

Given this social outcome, even “literacy from the ground up” becomes more symptomatic of a continuing colonization rather than evidence of an “indigenous-controlled uptake of literacy” that “we” (irritating deictic noted) should support (Bialostok and Whitman this issue). Speaking as a (capital “N”) “Native anthropologist,” I (Uran) do not have the privilege of being able to simply bear critical witness to colonization; neither can I merely “support” and “document” efforts at decolonization (Bialostok and Whitman this issue). My existence, on several levels, is itself a product of colonization. This is true of everyone currently walking the planet. Colonization is, after all, largely a process of presuming the power to define the colonized, and in doing so co-opting the self-determination of both the colonized and the colonizers. So “indigenous-controlled” anything is a suspect construct, perhaps useful for temporary comparison but far too shaky to support serious criticism of colonization. And from my experience, as both an Anishinaabe and a scholar, when faced with a strategic deployment of “tradition” as a means of coping with change (Sahlins 2000), like the “warrior” ideal reported by Bialostok and Whitman (this issue), it is impossible to say if it issued from an indigenous voice or a nonindigenous one.

PART 2: Usurping the Master's Tool

I (Hermes) cannot say what the role of the anthropologist should be in "indigenizing modernity," because I cannot imagine all the various identities and positions educational anthropologists may occupy; neither would I presume to exclude indigenous people from this group. I can, however, offer a response to Rob Whitman's ethnographic descriptions by describing my own experience as an indigenous scholar teaching Ojibwe and at times, English literacy. Sadly, at this point, English is the first language for many Native American students. Strategies that center indigenous languages must still critically theorize the place of English, and consider the power of appropriation.

Over the past 12 years, I have spent half of my appointment working in tribal or public school settings, mainly with Native American children. I spent the other half employed in Native and non-Native teacher education. I have consciously chosen to work in between communities (university and K-12; Native and white) because I am committed to the idea of praxis (Lather 1991). In both the tribal school and the public charter school I taught English, among other things.

Some of the projects I valued the most were those that engaged students to think critically and then to "create" something. At the reservation school, one of these projects had the students researching loss of land through allotment (on the reservation). Students started with their own question, "Why do all the lake houses belong to white people?" They conducted oral history interviews and then wrote and produced a play. More recently, in my work at the language-immersion school, we used our "English" class time to produce, write, and direct short movies using the iMovies software done entirely in the Ojibwe language. After all, learning one's heritage language supports the overall language ability. In my teaching, I seek out "spaces of radical openness" (Lourde 1984), that is, those places that provide opportunities to use critical thinking or to create something as informed by critical thinking; this allows me to connect what students already know to a broader social-political analysis.

What these projects had in common was that they did not demand rational responses from students but, rather, invited students to create or produce in response to the curriculum. Students were able to interact with each other, the community, and their own identities in their creative acts. These classes also, incidentally, demanded that students use literacy skills (in the narrow sense as defined in Bialostok and Whitman this issue). Many teachers have, more successfully than I, created the mix I describe above (e.g., Ladson-Billings 1995). After all, I assume that good pedagogy—even within the constraints of bad curriculum—creates a space for students to invent and reinvent their identities. It is the art of teaching. It appears that currently mandated literacy programs are a real threat to these practices (Altwerger 2006). Spending four hours a day in scripted (reading and math) programs leaves little room for spaces of radical openness, and it explains the painfully short two hours a week of Middle Spokane Salish (Bialostok and Whitman this issue).

I have found that many indigenous students already possess a critical awareness of oppression, at least the oppression they experience in their own skin. Tapping into this critical thinking and using it as leverage to further their analysis has been a way for me to let students know that they do bring skills to school. The example of the Veteran's day stories, like my example of the allotment stories, seemed to do just this: it connects oral literacy skills with written literacy while the content honors community knowledge and values.

Coupling critical thinking with a creative act is equally important to balance out the solely cerebral. The reification of rational thought is out of place with the goal to restore the social balance among populations who have survived genocide but are still recovering from historical trauma. The solely cerebral, no matter how liberatory in intent, does nothing to recognize the “soul wound” (Peacock and Cleary 1998) that is now as much a part of our history and identity as the boarding schools and powwows. This is an important part of the mix of hybridity that Whitfield alludes to but fails to mention. Programs based on rational thought alone, delivered either in a scripted literacy program or an “empowering” one are not enough (Ellsworth 1989). Greg Sarris refers to these literacy approaches as teaching “objectivism and text positivism . . . this begins, or at least reinforces, that chasm-forming process where the students, if they are to succeed in the classroom, must shelve personal experience . . . and adapt the norms and definitions prescribed by the teacher and the classroom activities” (1993:257).

Although we do support the sovereign right of tribes to decide what kind of literacy programs they want in their schools, and in whatever language they deem appropriate, we know the reality is that most of the teachers (and many of the administrators) of Native students are non-Native, English speaking, and U.S. certified. Further, tribal schools rely on federal funding (guaranteed in treaties in exchange for land cession), which is funneled through a complex maze of bureaucracies and layers of interpretation of policies. The reality of supporting indigenous-controlled literacy demands negotiating the complex terrain of contemporary indigenous communities; categories of “traditional” and “authentic” are impediments to this understanding. We appreciate the authors’ recognition of essentialist categories, but we worry about how we will avoid replacing the old categories with new ones: “cultural purity” is replaced with “hybridity”; “illiterate Indians” is replaced by “tech savvy traditional [ones]”; and suppressed colonized voices now speak with moral authority informed by oppression privilege (*Kinchole* in Grande 2004). We hope they are knowledgeable about literacy as well as oppression. Unproblematic monolithic description of indigenous people, or uncritical support for “programs that support and are organized by their targets for their own needs” (Bialostok and Whitman this issue) needs to be informed by the actual forging of long-term alliances between members of indigenous communities and committed scholars (recognizing that sometimes these people are one in the same). There has to be a better way to understand people than through categories and hierarchies. In other words, if you get the chance, we hope you go back to Spokane.

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