

# WALKING TOGETHER

First Nations, Métis and Inuit Perspectives in Curriculum

Connection to Land

## **Where are we? Finding Common Ground in a Curriculum of Place**

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**Government of Alberta** ■



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In a Curriculum of Place<sup>1</sup>  
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**Where are we? Finding common ground in a curriculum of place<sup>1</sup>**

What follows arises from my collaboration with three groups of people. First, I have the privilege of working with Erika Hasebe-Ludt who is principal investigator on a Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada funded study on new literacies<sup>2</sup> and Carl Leggo, a co-investigator in that research.<sup>3</sup> Second, for the past four years I have collaborated with Helen Balanoff at the Northwest Territories (NWT) Literacy Council and Emily Kudlak and Alice Koadloak in Ulukhaktok, NWT on a research project exploring the *Kangiryuarmuit* and their literacies, especially those learned and practiced on the land. In this case, the literacies are not new but old, non-scriptist literacies that are necessary to live in particular places, literacies that are being re-newed, re-learned and retained in contemporary times.<sup>4</sup> Most recently, this research has culminated in an exhibit at the Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre in Yellowknife, NWT. The exhibit is entitled *Pihuaqtiuyugut: We Are the Long Distance Walkers* and focuses on the literacies of the *Kangiryuarmuit*. This exhibit tells the story of how literacies were learned on the land, and how the people of Ulukhaktok, NWT have adapted these literacies to contemporary community life.<sup>5</sup>

My relationship with the women, I work with on this project, extends far beyond the boundaries of researcher collaboration into the tentatively more intimate territories of friendship and apprenticeship. In the domains of knowledge we explore, they are my mentors and I am their apprentice.

Finally, I want to acknowledge my extended dialogues and collaboration with Narcisse Blood from the Kainai Nation and Principal Investigator on a research project sponsored by the Canadian Council on Learning (CCL) Aboriginal Learning Knowledge Centre (ALKC). This research project is entitled *The Learning from Place Theme Bundle* and it is housed in Red Crow College on the Blood Reserve in Southern Alberta.<sup>6</sup> In June 2005 and June 2006, Narcisse Blood and I designed and taught a two-course undergraduate institute at the University of Lethbridge entitled *Connecting with Kitaowahsinnoo*. This course combined oncampus seminars about learning from place, particularly in Blackfoot territory (Blood & Chambers, 2008; Chambers, 2006), with the experience of field trips to those places, experiencing the phenomenology of landscape and the pedagogy of *visiting*, visiting as a way of learning the “wisdom that sits in places” (Basso, 1996). Together Narcisse Blood and I wrote and produced a video documentary that followed the students in their journey through these places and documents the effect learning in this way, about these places, had on them as teachers and as human beings, and particularly as inhabitants or dwellers in Blackfoot territory.<sup>7</sup>

My acknowledgement of these people is a brief “review of the literature.” What I wrote above constitutes an introduction to the relations of social and intellectual kinship that make generation of knowledge about a curriculum of place possible. At this point, my writing about these ideas is a kind of “stammering” (Deleuze and Parnet, 1977/1987), trying to be bilingual



even in the single language (p. 4) of globalized English; not the mother tongue of the places about which I speak nor necessarily the best language to represent the curriculum of those places. In writing about the people with whom I work and write, I am offering an introduction to them and their ideas and practice, as if we were meeting face-to-face. I introduce you to them through writing. But therein lies danger and I must be cautious for as Deleuze (1987) says,

Writing is very simple. Either it is a way of reterritorializing oneself, conforming to a code of dominant utterances, to a territory of established states of things: not just schools and authors, but all those who write professionally, even in a non-literary sense. Or else, on the other hand, it is becoming, becoming something other than a writer, since what one is becoming at the same time becomes something other than writing (p. 74).

#### Four Dimensions of a Curriculum of Place

While there maybe more, below I raise four dimensions of a curriculum of place as a starting point for a conversation about what a curriculum of place is, how it works in our lives and its significance for education.

##### 1. A curriculum of place calls for a different sense of time.

When Wendell Berry asks the question, “Where are we?” he invokes a relational model, one in which “decency in land use” arises from propriety (Cayley, 2008). By propriety, Berry means that we recognize that our position in a place is in relation to the circumstances of that place. Once we understand this, claims Berry, we may be able to proceed to a reliable idea of what is appropriate to do in that place. Wendell Berry has farmed in Kentucky for over forty years where he has been committed to land conservation and the restoration of community. For someone who has lived as nomadically as I have, forty years seems like a long time. In all the places I have ever lived, and I have lived in many, there were always people who lived there before me. And they lived there a lot longer than forty years. The Blackfoot say about the settlers who came into their territory a century and a half ago, “They have just arrived.” This is stated as fact. But also with some astonishment that those who have just arrived could presume to know so much. The people who dwell in the places I have lived have stories that go back to the time before stories, back to the time when these places came into being. For the *Kangiryuarmuit* to know *nunakput*, that is “our land,” to know *hila*, that is the cosmos: the stars, the weather and the atmosphere; for the *Kangiryuarmuit* to know the circumstances of *nunakput* and *hila*, so they are “thoroughly at home” (Ingold, 2000) there, has taken a long time. For the Blackfoot to know *kitaowahsinnoon*, the land that nourishes us, and what is appropriate to do in that place, has taken a long time (Blood & Chambers, 2008). Longer than forty years. Longer than a lesson plan or a unit, a reporting period or a semester; longer than scope and sequence cycle or budget year. Longer than the term of a single government or even a series of governments. Longer than forty years.

## 2. A curriculum of place is enskillment.

From a dwelling perspective, a person's being is constituted through the tasks that he or she conducts as he or she dwells in a particular place within a region of places. Each place in *nuna* for the *Kangiryuarmiut* or each place in *kitaowahsinnoon* for the Blackfoot is part of a "relational network," as Leroy Little Bear (1998, p. 15) calls it, within a three-dimensional territory, one that encompasses land, water and sky and all the beings who dwell in those realms. Social anthropologist, Tim Ingold (2000), calls these inter-relational networks "spheres of nurture" because these regions are sources of nourishment: they feed human beings with knowledge, spirit and with bodily sustenance. As the Blackfoot say in their prayers, "We rely on you, on the land, on the animals. You nurture us." People receive nourishment from particular places, and the inhabitants of those places, as they learn the skills necessary to live in those places. And as they learn and practice the skills necessary to live in that particular place they become who they are. I want to draw your attention to four critical dimensions of skilled practice (Ingold, 2000) that are helpful in understanding where we are and what is appropriate to do in this place.

### *First*

The intentionality and functionality of a skilled practice are immanent in the practice itself (Ingold, 2000). Intentionality does not reside with the (acting and thinking) subject nor does functionality reside with the (inert) object. In enskillment the intentionality and functionality are immanent in the practice itself. Thus an *ulu*, or a woman's knife, becomes an *ulu* as a woman uses it in a field of situated practice. A woman becomes a woman as she works with the *ulu* and the materials she cuts with the *ulu*. Her use of the *ulu* is embedded within a particular set of ecological relations: the animal and where it was hunted, the weather, the season, the location of the use, and so on. Before beginning, a carver may ask of his materials: Who are you? What are you? The carver works in ecological relation with the raw materials and the tools to bring a carving into being. And through carving he becomes a carver. A hunter becomes a hunter as he hunts; a sewer becomes a sewer as she sews. Intentionality and functionality are immanent in the practice itself.

### *Second*

Skilled practices are embedded within specific ecologies. An artisan engaging in skilled practice within his or her richly structured environment constitutes an entire system of relations (Ingold, 2000). Thus, the knowledge at the heart of a curriculum of place is not "traditional knowledge as enframed in the discourses of modernity" but "traditional knowledge as generated in the practices of locality" (Ingold & Kurttila, 2000 cited in Huntington, 2005, p. 30). This knowledge is embedded within the skilled practices, and those practices are constituted within specific locales by particular human beings who are becoming who they are as they practice those ecologically embedded skills. Thus, as Deleuze (1987) says, "Becomings belong to geography..." (p. 2).

### *Third*

The generation of this knowledge, and the practice of these skills, involves qualities of care, judgment and dexterity (Ingold, 2000). Enskillment is not the mechanical application of a

skill, nor the application of force upon a tool; rather, enskillment requires an ongoing perceptual monitoring of the emerging task. The carving only comes into being as the carver continually monitors the emerging form of the carving with his hands, his eyes, his ears, and his entire body. The same applies for a sewer. The parka only comes into being as a parka as the sewer continually monitors the emerging form of parka with her hands, her eyes, and her entire body. Dexterity is the skilled practitioner's capacity to move and adjust his or her movements in direct response to emerging surrounding conditions.

#### *Fourth*

Skilled practice is acquired and passed on through practical hands-on experience (Ingold, 2000). These skilled arts, and the knowledge embedded within them, cannot be codified as a system of rules and representations, much as is expected in school curricula; nor can they be transmitted as schemata or by formulae, much as is expected in lesson and unit planning. In the academic year 2007-08, Red Crow Community College offered, for the first time, an accredited course in brain-tanning deer hides ([www.redcrowcollege.com](http://www.redcrowcollege.com)). In such a context, enskillment means that novices (students who, although Blackfoot, had never before prepared an animal skin for use in sewing, let alone used the brains of the animal to soften the hide in preparation) have opportunities for apprenticeship, the education of attention and environmentally situated action (Ingold, 2000). As "traditional knowledge" "generated in the practices of locality" (Ingold & Kurttila, 2000 cited in Huntington, 2005, p. 30) or in Berry's notion of ecological imperative of what is appropriate to do in this place, each generation provides opportunities to pass on these critical skills through practical hands-on experience. Rather than directly teaching the skills as a system of rules transmitted by formulae, skilled practitioners teach novices through the:

**Education of attention**—Mentors direct the attention of the novice to what the novice must watch, listen, and feel to practice the skill. The education of attention is undertaken through story and song and through modeling rather than verbal directions.

**Environmentally situated action**—to be perceptually engaged in an activity in the environment where the skill is practiced, not in a situation removed from it. Skilled practitioners from one generation give novices opportunities for hands-on practice *in the context in which the skill is used*. For example, as they begin sewing, young girls were given small manageable tasks, at which they could be successful. They may have begun by sewing clothes for a doll. Skills need to respond appropriately to the places where we live require skills learned in the environment where the skill is to be practiced. These skills are not learned by reading about them in a book or by memorizing a formal description of the procedure in a classroom.

#### *Fifth*

A practitioner uses his or her skills and knowledge creatively and generatively in new contexts (Ingold, 2000). For example, *Kangiryuarmuit* sewers use rules of thumb, templates and measures to create new parka forms. They continually generate new parka designs in response to changes in available raw materials (i.e., materials imported from the south) and tools (such as computerized sewing machines) and emerging designs as well as changes in the surrounding environment. Thus, a curriculum of place calls for a creative and generative "poetics of tool use" (Ingold, 2000), whether the tool is a pen or a knife. In a curriculum of place the activities in

which we engage children are the very activities they need to dwell in this place, to be nourished by the place and to nourish it. In a curriculum of place, young people or novices grow into knowledge through engagement in hand-on activities learning side-by-side with masters of the crafts. This knowledge enables people to find their way in that place where they dwell and this knowledge and these skills endow them with identity. Thus in a curriculum of place knowledge is both *social* and *technical*. The knowledge is *social* because it is learned through the social relations of being educated; it is *technical* because it requires enskillment.

3. A curriculum of place calls for an “education of attention.”

Is it not truly extraordinary to realise that ever since men have walked, no-one has ever asked why they walk, how they walk, whether they walk, whether they might walk better, what they achieve by walking, whether they might not have the means to regulate, change or analyse their walk: questions that bear on all the systems of philosophy, psychology and politics with which the world is preoccupied? (Honoré de Balzac cited in Ingold, 2004)<sup>8</sup>

To know where we are requires a “sophisticated perceptual awareness” (Ingold, 2000) and direct and sensuous engagement with the world. This is perhaps my greatest handicap in learning from place. To dwell in a place, to come to know a place and to call that place *home* so I know what is appropriate to do there, requires that I learn to watch. I could say: *observe* or *see*. But both observe and see bear within them a mode of distancing—the very disengagement with place—that has led to the ecological degradation we are in the midst of. Watching is both a perceptual and an intellectual engagement with what is watched. Watching is relational because watching implies “I am being watched” as well as “I am watching”, so that the very animism of what I watch is recognized. Like watching, listening is a skilled practice necessary to a curriculum of place.

Stories and songs direct our attention to the world and poetically engage us with it (Ingold, 2000). Along with stone tent rings and *inukhuit*<sup>9</sup> in *nunakput*, and medicine wheels and pictographs in *kitaowahsinnoo*, indigenous peoples marked their territory, and recorded their existence with evidence of their presence (Little Bear, 2004a; 2004b). Through stories and songs *Kangiryuarmiut* elders reported in minute detail what they had overheard from their parents and their grandparents when they were very young children, and “just started to wake up” (Balanoff & Chambers, 2008). *Kangiryuarmiut* children are educated to watch and listen to animals, birds, plants, water, snow, wind, and astronomical beings, as well as other human beings.

An education of awareness requires that they learn how to feel with their hands and bodies so that they can know if the snow is the right texture for making a snow house, if the hide is soft enough, if the stitches are tight enough, if the berries are ripe enough. When asked about a particular place on the land, one of the *Kangiryuarmiut* elders said, “I can’t tell you about that place because I never walked there in the summer time” (Balanoff & Chambers, in press). Knowing where we are means getting “out of your car, off your horse” as Wendell Berry (1991) said.

An important outcome of educating attention is *aakakiiyosit*, a Blackfoot word that loosely translates as “to pay attention acutely so that one can be aware of danger and act wisely.” My granddaughter Nimîyîkôwin is a great watcher and listener. One day in the heat of the summer, Nimîyîkôwin was part of a group that walked single file on a trail in the coulees. The most experienced person was in the lead and Nimîyîkôwin was to follow in the rear. She broke the protocol. She veered off the trail and ran to the front of the line, right into the path of a rattlesnake. *Aakakiiyosit*. Pay attention. Be aware of where you are. Act wisely. Where was she? She was in the coulees where rattlers soak up the heat of the day. What is appropriate to do in this place? To walk single file, to pay attention, to listen. Rattlesnakes always tell you where they are, that they are here. Novices must learn to perceive the world in which they are immersed. Through the education of attention each generation learns to notice the clues in a place, the clues through which each generation must learn how to live here, and the clues by which what it means to live here, may be revealed.

#### 4. A curriculum of place is a wayfinding.

*Kangiryuarmit* call themselves “the long distance walkers” (Uluhaktok Literacies Research Project, 2008). The museum exhibit based on our research on literacies explores represents an interpretation of the skills people learned on the land as literacies. In a curriculum of place, literacy is multiple and multi-faceted; it includes such skills or arts as dancing, singing, storytelling, sewing, and hunting (Balanoff & Chambers, forthcoming). These literacies were learned, practiced and generated as part of the journey through *nunakput*, “our land.” Every summer the people walked inland from the arctic sea ice to hunt caribou. People walked for two and three years to trade and visit. People moved camp and walked hundreds of kilometres because they were lonely for someone. Travelling through the land—whether to hunt and fish and gather plants, or to camp and to spend leisure time—requires the skills of wayfinding. Through a complex and extended apprenticeship novices learn from mentors (Aporta, 2003) how to travel, how to read the wind and the clouds, how to read the constellations, the sun and the moon, to predict weather, to tell the time, and to find their way.

Wayfinding is knowing as you go (Aporta, 2003; Ingold, 2000); it is living your geography (Collignon, 2003); learning a place by dwelling and traveling in that place (Ingold, 2000). *Kangiryuarmit* live their geography; they learn about that place and what is appropriate and necessary to do there as they move along trails that “lead around, towards or away from places or to places elsewhere” (Ingold, 2000). *Kangiryuarmit* elders re-enact their journeys made through stories and songs and drawings.

When I travel with Narcisse Blood to places in Blackfoot territory, throughout the journey Narcisse narrates previous experiences in those places, experiences through which he continually reconstitutes himself as *Kainai*. And through these stories he renews our relationship as people who have travelled to these places together, and with our students. It is through these stories we become friends and relations. And traveling and visiting places in *kitaowahsinnon* has been significant for the student teachers and practicing teachers who attended the summer institutes, as well. At these sites, those of previous generations told stories about these places, sang the songs to be sung in each place. As the students visited the sites and each other at these



places, new stories and songs were created and composed. At the sites, both teachers and students became apprentices to what was to be learned in those places. On our visits, we cooked and ate together; we prayed and mediated; we walked alone and together. And we practiced doing things that were appropriate to do in that particular location at that particular time. After visiting a place, the students drew pictures, created photo essays, wrote journals, and told stories. Most importantly, the students returned to the sites with their friends and their family, and, in some cases, with their own students.

Leroy Little Bear (2004a) says, “You have an ID (identity) problem when the land doesn’t recognize you anymore.” As Ramona Big Head (Blood & Chambers, 2006), one of the teachers who took the summer institute, said, “I don’t ever want this land not to recognize me anymore.” Ramona Big Head (2008) went on to write a play, about a significant site, as the culminating project for her Masters of Education. She cast her play “*Strike Them Hard!*” *The Baker Massacre* with Blackfoot students and directed the premiere performance at the Performing the World conference in New York City on October 4, 2008 (performingtheworld.org).

These “narrative re-enactments of journeys made” (Ingold, 2000) form “memory maps” (Warner, n.d.) of places. Ramona Big Head’s aim is that the students who performed in this play, and the audiences who engaged with it, recognize the resilience of those who survived this trauma and never forget this story (personal communication, 03 October 2008). The stories—Ramona’s, Narcisse’s, Emily Kudlak’s or mine—poetically re-constitute the interrelatedness of the places traveled, the activities practiced in those places, the relations among the human beings involved and their relationships with the other beings in those places: the plants, the animals, and spirits of ancestors and places. The stories and songs are a poetics of remembrance, and those memories are located in places. “If creation is to continue,” says Leroy Little Bear (2000) “then it must be renewed. Renewal ceremonies, the telling and retelling of creation stories, the singing and resigning of the songs, are all humans’ part in the maintenance of creation.” Stories and songs and ceremonies are ways of mapping; they are the tools of wayfinding in place and through life.

“As Seamus Heaney wrote, in a different context, ‘it is not the grudge but the grief that matters.’ There is no reason to repeat the past, in more ways than one” (Warner, n.d.). There is a great deal of grief and sorrow about place in Canada, about land and who it belongs to, about whose stories get told and which stories are to be believed. There is also a great deal of fear about what is happening to these places in *nunakput*, in *kitaowahsinnoo*, in all the places we call home. Ted Chamberlin (2003) asks if more than one people can ever call a place home. I don’t know but I don’t think we have much choice. A curriculum of place is no longer optional. As Andy Blackwater (Blood & Chambers, 2008), a Kainai elder, said: the Blackfoot are not going anywhere; the newcomers are not going anywhere; now the same peg anchors the tips of both.

It is not the grudge but the grief that matters, and what we are going to do about it. It is where we are that matters. By learning to do what is appropriate in this place, and doing it together, perhaps we can find the common ground necessary to survive.





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**Notes:**

- 1 Invited panel presentation to Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies President's Symposium at the 2008 annual meeting of the Canadian Society for the Study of Education in Vancouver.
- 2 SSHRC Standard Research Grant #410-2007-2313.
- 3 See *Life Writing and Autobiography as an Ethos for Our Times*, an upcoming publication in Peter Lang's Complicated Conversations in Curriculum series (senior editor, William F. Pinar) for exemplars of the writing enabled by this research and its exploration of new forms of literacy, the ones called for by the times and by the complicated constituencies and topographies of Canadian education.
- 4 SSHRC Aboriginal Research Grant #856-2007-0051.
- 5 See the Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre web site, [www.pwnhc.ca](http://www.pwnhc.ca), for a more detailed description of the exhibit. The research team is publishing a catalogue to accompany the exhibit. For more information please contact NWT Literacy Council ([www.nwt.literacy.ca](http://www.nwt.literacy.ca)).
- 6 To learn more about the research that has been produced by and disseminated through this innovative national project visit the Aboriginal Learning Knowledge Centre ([www.cclcca.ca/CCL/AboutCCL/KnowledgeCentres/AboriginalLearning/](http://www.cclcca.ca/CCL/AboutCCL/KnowledgeCentres/AboriginalLearning/)).
- 7 Contact the author for more information on to view the video, entitled, *Kaaahsinnooniksi...If the land could speak and we would listen*. This thirty-minute video may be available through the Alberta Education On-Line Guide to Implementation in 2009 ([www.onlineguide.learnalberta.ca](http://www.onlineguide.learnalberta.ca)).
- 8 Ingold cited Honoré de Balzac from his essay 'Théorie de la démarche', by in *Oeuvres diverses de Honoré de Balzac, Vol. 2* (1830–1835), Paris: Louis Conard, 1938, pp. 613–43. Balzac's 'Theory of walking' was originally published in English in 1833. This English translation of the passage, from p. 614, is Ingold's.
- 9 *Inukhuit* is the plural form for *inukshuk*, the rock cairns built to mark specific places in formations often resembling human beings.

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