

Book Review

Braiding Histories: Learning From Aboriginal Peoples' Experiences and Perspectives

Susan Dion

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Susan Dion's *Braiding Histories: Learning from Aboriginal Peoples' Experiences and Perspectives* (2009) emerged from her doctoral research, *Braiding Histories: Responding to the Problematics of Canadians Hearing a First Nations Perspective of Post-Contact History*. Dion's exploration of the relationship between Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people in Canada, and the implications this relationship has on teaching and learning, offers important pedagogical contributions that are useful for curriculum developers, education administrators, teacher educators, and teachers of First Nations content. Dion's work draws attention to concerns with the presentation of First Nations content in school curriculum and, through three Braiding Histories Stories, offers a transformative approach to "the ways in which Aboriginal people are remembered and (re)presented in the school curriculum" (2009, p. 13). This book presents an empirical study of the way that the Braiding Histories Stories were presented by two classroom teachers with predominantly non-Aboriginal students. It investigates the relationship that teacher responsibilities and dominant teaching discourses had on the teaching and learning exchange between the teachers and their students.

The Braiding Histories Stories, originally co-written with Dion's brother Michael as part of the larger Braiding Histories project, offer the (re)telling of the life stories of Plains Cree Chief Mistahimaska, Beothuk woman Shawnadithit, and their mother Audrey Dion. Describing the project as a potential for informing a "pedagogy of possibility" (2009, p. 64), Dion maintains that the intention of the stories is to disrupt the dominant approaches that produce and reinforce the notion of Aboriginal peoples as romanticized, mythical Others. Moreover, the author explains that the Braiding Histories Stories were written "in the hope for justice" (2009, p. 47) and contribute to the healing process of Aboriginal people. To strengthen the above articulation, the author weaves in the works of Janice Acoose (1993) and Marie Annharte Baker (1994) who confirm the healing power of stories and the important role they play in advancing "the beauty and strength of First Nations people" (2009, p. 47). Extending these earlier works, the healing power of stories inspired her and Michael to write in a way that promoted healing and recovery:

We wrote the stories with all Canadians in mind, hoping that they would contribute to healing by accomplishing change in the relationship between First Nations and non-First Nations people. We intended them as an acknowledgement of the pain of the past and a hope for things to be different today and in the future. . . . Recognizing injustice and celebrating resistance are first steps toward accomplishing justice. The purpose of our stories is not to assign blame or guilt. They are about healing and recovery. (Dion, 2009, pp. 47-48)

By outlining the tensions associated with (re)telling the stories in a way that engages non-Aboriginal readers, Dion draws attention to the difficulty of achieving cross-cultural understandings in a curriculum that is inherently political. Dion points out, for example, that given the content reflected in the assimilationist intents of the Canadian government and the destructive outcomes these intents had on entire Nations of Aboriginal peoples, there was a fear that non-Aboriginal readers may feel attacked, and, in turn, may resist (or even miss) the intended message. Including content that aligned with the current history curriculum was also a consideration of the way the stories were presented. Dion asserts “in our (re)telling, we deliberately placed the events of the story in relation to Confederation, as a means of locating it within the time frame of legitimized history that students are taught in school” (2009, p. 39). Again, by noting the above tension, the author clearly articulates the difficulty of introducing Aboriginal specific course content into a system that is infused with culturally irrelevant curriculum and representations of Aboriginal people.

While Dion discusses the tensions associated with engaging non-Aboriginal readers, she also demonstrates her commitment to (re)telling the stories in a way that truly honours the lived experiences of Aboriginal people, maintaining “we want to reflect the complexities of our subjects as they responded to the events of colonization” (2009, p. 38). Again, the author problematizes the culturally irrelevant curriculum that permeates dominant approaches to teaching about Aboriginal peoples. Arguing that existing curriculum only presents one truth and is based on stereotypical representations of the romanticized mythical *Other*, Dion is committed to revealing accurate understandings of Aboriginal realities. This commitment is evident in the following excerpt from one of the Braiding Histories Stories:

When Mistahimaska spoke at his trial, he was not able to tell his story, but now, speaking to you, to Canadians who have come to inherit the land that once gave life to the Cree Nation, I will pass his story on to you. (2009, p. 40)

Describing herself as “entangled in the tensions that emerge in the intersection of speaking and hearing across difference” (2009, p. 56), Dion explores the questions that came to her mind as she wrote and (re)told the Braiding Histories Stories:

1. “What do non-Aboriginal people hear when we speak?”
2. “What is the appeal, the enticing nature, of the discourse of the romantic, mythical Other?”
3. “What is the source of the refusal to hear?” (2009, p. 56)

Drawing on Edward Said (1994), Dion positions the romanticizing of the mythical *Other* as a means to justify the acts of the colonizing governments to “bring civilization to primitive or barbaric minds” (2009, p. 56). Further, she advises, the refusal to hear is attributed to an understanding of the colonization of Aboriginal peoples as something of the past with no relevance to the present.

Reaffirming the tensions she faced with attempting to (re)tell the stories for a non-Aboriginal audience in a way that honours the lived experiences, Dion points out that the Braiding Histories project:

encompasses a double agenda: our need to (re)member and (re)tell in a way that affirms the strength and humanity of First Nations people is complicated by our need to (re)tell in a way that will engage Canadians in a rethinking of their current understanding. (2009, p. 62)

Dion asserts that while the above is implicated by the notion that non-Aboriginal peoples have control over what is told and how it is told, the Braiding Histories project is told “for a specific audience with a specific purpose in mind” (2009, p. 62). Dion’s acknowledgment of the complications inherent in (re)telling the stories reveals to what extent an ongoing colonial relationship exists, and is intertwined, within the dominant mindset that perpetuates school curriculum. It is this very relationship among the dominant mindset and the governing bodies that control what is learned in school and how it is learned.

At the heart of this book is a textured analysis of the way this relationship shapes teacher performance and influences the way the Braiding Histories Stories were taught by the teachers in her study. Dion critically examines the challenges that the teachers were confronted with when they took the Braiding Histories Stories into their classrooms. Dion acknowledges that the ways in which the stories were understood in the classrooms were influenced by the teachers’ and students’ prior experiences and preconceived understandings of Aboriginal peoples. Additionally, she considers the extent to which the dominant discourses of the Mythical and romanticized Other shaped the teacher’s understanding of the Braiding Histories Stories.

One of the strengths of this text, given the audience for whom it is intended, is that the author discusses the way in which the “Native Studies” portion of the curriculum has shifted over time with new educational acts. For example, she makes note of the education reform influenced by theorists such as William Pinar and Michael Apple who argued that the socio-political function of the curriculum played a significant role in reproducing social inequality. The author asserts that these theorists, along with others who recognized schools as a site for social change, were instrumental in the creation of the *People of Native Ancestry* (PONA) guidelines published by the Ontario Ministry of Education (OME) in 1975. Dion also makes note of other OME guidelines such as *Multiculturalism in Action* (1977), *Curriculum Guideline: Native Studies Intermediate Division* (1991), and *Antiracism and Ethnocultural Equity in School Boards* (1993). While Dion points out that the PONA and the *Curriculum Guideline: Native Studies Intermediate Division* offer an alternative approach to teaching Canadian history, she advises that school boards are not obligated to make use of the documents. More importantly, Dion maintains that the documents offer a multiculturalism discourse of celebrating difference that reproduces the dominant romanticized and mythical Other representations of Aboriginal people. The documents are described as lacking in curriculum that addresses issues of inequality and injustice. Further, advising that these documents fail to examine the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, Dion points out the need to investigate and challenge the Eurocentric nature of these curriculum documents. In response, she maintains that teaching First Nations content must go beyond the stereotypical representations of the mythical Other and adopt an approach that allows students “to become involved in an investigation of the impact of colonization on First Nations communities and its implications for today” (2009, pp. 73-74). Providing a critical lens on the extent to which these

documents shape teacher approaches to First Nations content through discourses of antiracism and multiculturalism is a timely consideration in light of the recent *Ontario First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework* (2007). This policy framework appears to offer little change, and much like the above mentioned documents, it is not mandatory.

While the Braiding Histories narratives were offered in hopes to support an examination of the greater socio-political implications of the colonization, and forced assimilation of Aboriginal people, Dion's book reveals that the complexities teachers face, as a result of their preconceived notions and teacher responsibilities, structure the way curriculum is delivered. She found that because the teachers' approaches to the Braiding Histories curriculum was framed by their own "pedagogical scaffolding" (2009, p. 176), the curriculum that was intended to disrupt dominant approaches to First Nations studies was instead delivered in a way that reinforced these understandings. Dion maintains:

The scaffolding of ideas that normalizes teachers' approaches to teaching Aboriginal subject material in school gives intelligibility to their teaching practice. This scaffolding or overlapping of different discourses functions to construct students' understanding of themselves, of Aboriginal people, and of themselves in relationship with Aboriginal people. Some knowledge becomes lost in the scaffolding, and some knowledge the scaffolding cannot support. (2009, p. 103)

Advising that the teachers' approach to teaching the stories is structured by a complex grid of ideas about what was required of them as professionals, Dion identifies three discourses of professionalism that govern teacher's approaches to First Nations curriculum: (a) teaching well, (b) pastoral care, and (c) citizenship education. Advising that the teachers were comfortable teaching about the oppression of Aboriginal people through a discourse of social care and pity, Dion points out that "this approach to teaching about Aboriginal people and Canadians, which includes a didactic recounting of factual events and a nurturing of an empathetic response from students, limits engagement with difficult knowledge and avoids conflict" (2009, p. 99).

This book interrogates the "pedagogical scaffolding" that governs teaching approaches by revealing the tensions that teachers were faced with in attempts to meet their responsibilities of "developing pride in being Canadian and celebrating the accomplishments of the Canadian nation" (Dion, 2009, p. 128), while at the same time attending to the difficult realities that the Braiding Histories Stories uncovered. Dion points out that because of these tensions, the teachers focused on the individual presented in the text rather than facilitate an examination of the wider socio-political implications that contribute to the suffering of many. Further, through a concern with social justice and discourse of social care, the teachers' approach to the story did not support an examination of the greater socio-political implications of the forced assimilation on the day-to-day lived experiences of Aboriginal people. Dion maintains that a "richness to the story is lost when student engagement is structured by empathy and discourses of social care" (2009, p. 128).

Drawing attention to the difficulties that arose when the teachers attempted to adopt the Braiding Histories Stories into their classroom, and articulating that "teachers cannot teach what they do not know" (2009, p. 103), Dion's work contributes to the limited body of research that focuses on the need for teacher preparedness of Aboriginal content as a mandatory requirement in teacher certification programs (Cherubini & Hodson, 2008; Hodson & Manley-Casimir, 2008). The book's analysis and comprehensive arguments offer a necessary challenge to the dominant teaching discourses that implicate the way teachers deliver Aboriginal content

in their classrooms.

This book leaves a taste for further considerations of what the transformation of teachers' understandings of First Nations curriculum might comprise. In the final chapter of the book, "Disrupting Moulded Images," Dion discusses her own experience working with teachers in a graduate class called Teaching and Learning from Indigenous Ways of Knowing which offers an excellent starting point towards this transformation. By engaging her students in creating a "File of (Un)certainties," Dion's intention is for students to look within themselves to critically examine their own preconceived notions of Aboriginal people, in order to call into question the limits of what they know as "truth," and to envision new possibilities for understanding the realities of Aboriginal people and their relationship with Aboriginal people. Through this teaching engagement Dion promotes an ethical awareness that advances "a promising way to progressively transform relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in the Canadian educational system" (2009, p. 190). Dion's book makes a significant contribution to the field of education by centering the classroom as a site for examining colonial relationships, disrupting moulded images, and transforming pedagogy. It is a must-read for all teachers concerned with a better understanding of non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal relationships, and the impact teaching and learning has on those relationships.

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