VOICE LESSONS:
TEACHING AND WRITING IN THE NORTHWEST TERRITORIES

by

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Abstract

This dissertation investigates writing practices attuned to northern places. Eight experienced teachers from six regions in Canada’s Northwest Territories agreed to think-together in a study which took a hermeneutic approach to the focusing, gathering, and the analysis of data. Writing was both the subject for the inquiry and the methodology, as I asked participants to engage in ten workshops designed to move conversations away from familiar answers to the question: what practices invite northern students to write? In a place where the majority of students are Indigenous, I hoped that the writing workshops would invite the non-Indigenous teachers to consider their relationship to the many interconnecting dimensions of place. While writing seems to take one away from the particulars of experience to more universal concerns as one tries to capture meaning, paradoxically, writing returns to the particular. In the first four chapters, I use my 19 years of experience as a northern teacher as a heuristic for the study by contrasting the thinking of ‘the new teacher who has just arrived in the North’ to the voice of ‘the researcher.’ Four data chapters take up the ideas that emerged from the thinking-together with the teachers. I examine how the teachers used complexity thinking to approach their writing pedagogy. I consider how new literacies might overlap Indigenous pedagogies and Western writing pedagogies. I assert that the qualia of individual experience might serve as engaging subject matter for student writing. And finally, I explore how teachers might orient writing practices toward the development of voice rather than overemphasize procedural text-based approaches. This study will add to the literature on teaching writing with Indigenous students and to the literature on post-process pedagogy, particularly as it draws from Geography. Through example, this dissertation may illustrate how non-Indigenous educators can draw from Indigenous education in a way that respects and integrates its philosophical foundations.
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Chapter 1 Introduction:  
Where the Next Step Might Lead Under Water

…radical hermeneutics summons us to ourselves not only in resoluteness, but with humility and compassion. Caputo wants us to stop basking in the sun, taking it easy, relishing the seductive comforts of the tropics. He would rather have us pack our bags and head up North, not quite to the arctic—there, everything is frozen, the ground is solid, immobile; it is a firm foundation, like metaphysics. Caputo wants us somewhere in the subarctic, preferably during spring, when the ice begins to thaw and the situation becomes unsure, less certain because we don’t know if the next step leads under water.

(Martinez, 1997, p. 6)

Heading up north

I packed my bags and headed up North to “somewhere in the subarctic” in the fall of 1987. Like the teachers in my study, I came for the job and I might have tacked on “adventure” as another reason. After one year of teaching elementary school French-as-a-second language in a small town in Ontario, I knew that pedagogy of chansons et bonbons in the 20–40 minutes of the classroom teacher’s preparation period was not for me. I was curious about the place where Indigenous people formed the majority of the population and controlled a public government at the territorial level. At the time it did not occur to me to question my right to teach in Fort Simpson, Northwest Territories (NWT). I felt entitled as a Canadian to go anywhere in ‘my country’ where a job was advertised.

In some ways, the research project I undertook in 2009 to investigate place-conscious writing pedagogy began as soon as I started to teach high school English
Language Arts in Fort Simpson because it was immediately evident that I was out of my element. Even in those early years, I posed the questions that were central to this research. What does it mean to live and teach in this place? What does it mean to teach writing here? What is the best way to approach the teaching of writing? Previously, I had neither ventured far from my childhood home in rural southern Ontario nor from my university home in Toronto. I did not know how to contend with life in a small, isolated Northern community, nor did I know how to teach in ways that would engage my students. I had little knowledge of the contemporary or historic experience of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people. I could very well have been like the high school students in my son’s school in Kingston, Ontario who sheepishly asked my half Dene son if he is angry because “We took your land.” Life in an Indigenous community required that I mull over the implications of the political, social, and cultural relationships of the first peoples of the NWT to the place where I was now teaching. Although Dene and Inuvialuit history began “when the world was new” (Blondin, 1990) and was recorded orally and passed down and transformed through the generations. I had more knowledge of the NWT’s written-in-English-by-outsiders history, which began in 1789 when Alexander Mackenzie explored the Mackenzie River, which starts in Great Slave Lake and flows North to the Beaufort Sea. Fort Simpson’s written history began in 1803 with the construction of a fort by the Northwest Company which was taken over by the Hudson’s Bay Company in 1822 (Helm, 2000).

Fort Simpson, the largest of nine fur-trading posts in the area, was established on the island at the confluence of the Dehcho (Mackenzie) and Naechag’ah (Liard) rivers at
a traditional gathering place known in the Dene language as “the place where two rivers come together.” At the time, the Dene lived on the land, relying primarily on moose and caribou, fish, and snowshoe hare, but they entered into trade relations for ammunition, tea, flour, and tobacco. These initial trade relations did not fundamentally alter Dene relations with the land that went beyond skills on and knowledge of the land to a recognition and respect for the land based on love not fear. Anglican and Roman Catholic priests came to the area in the 1850s and set up two missions at Fort Simpson in 1858 (Krech, 1984). The continuing relationship between Northern Indigenous people and the Catholic Church was made evident by the 1987 papal visit of Pope John Paul II.

The Dene lived nomadic lives moving on the land as the seasons required, but by 1905, some people had begun building log cabins at the forts or at major fishing camps where they might stay several weeks (Helm, 2000). The trading-mission era continued until the 1950s when the Canadian government, interested in sovereignty in Canada’s North after the Second World War (Milloy, 1999) and in mineral rights in Denendeh, Inuvialuit territory and Nunavut, sought to establish federal government infrastructure. In 1960 in Fort Simpson, a flood destroyed the Dene-built cabins on the flats on the south end of the island; the Dene moved up the hill, but by then, all of the prime real estate by the river had been taken and the town had already been laid out in a grid by the southerners who held jobs in the government or the Hudson Bay Company. Kulchyski (2005) reminds us that communities in the North are a new invention; their basic infrastructures of housing designs and education systems and even the presupposition of
“concentrated human occupation at a specific site for a lengthy duration” (p. 15) are derived from the colonial imagination.

For many years, the Northwest Territories was under federal control, governed from Ottawa. After ground work was laid in the ’60s, the Legislative Assembly of the Northwest Territories came into being in 1970 with Yellowknife as the capital of the newly formed government. After a long series of land negotiations with the federal government, begun in 1976, the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement Act and the Nunavut Act were passed in parliament. The Northwest Territories divided into east and west when the transition to the creation of the ‘new’ territory was completed in 1999.

In the west, in Denendeh and the Inuvialuit territory, a protest against a proposal to build a pipeline through the Mackenzie River Valley led to the federally-funded Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Inquiry of 1978 (later known as the Berger Inquiry), which brought national attention to the Dene who united as the Dene Nation (Watkins, 1986/1977). But, as George Erasmus points out in the concluding essay in the Watkins collection, the Dene right to self-determination was the larger issue at stake beyond the question of the pipeline or other colonial development in Denendeh. When I came to Fort Simpson in 1987, townspeople were still talking about the pipeline that might have been, and there was still tension as some people had built businesses in anticipation of the boom that never came and held hard feelings against those who thwarted their dreams. Often the Berger Inquiry is seen as the event that politicized the Dene, as if Indigenous political relationships are only those that transpire between Indigenous and European peoples, negating thousands of years of previous political and economic relationships with near neighbors and also those from further away. In the 1990s, land claim settlements began between the government of Canada, the Inuvialuit, and the five Northern Dene tribes. As land claim processes were completed at the turn of this century, the pipeline proposal was reexamined. This time,
without the extensive public consultation that was undertaken in the ’70s, the pipeline was approved although not without some dissent between and within regions, and not without the recognition that many elders who had spoken so powerfully and eloquently against it 30 years previously, had since passed away.

Much has changed politically, culturally and also socially in the North, where the young people are as apt to be interested in aspects of popular culture and as fluent in modern media as young people in Southern Canada. In fact, some of the teachers from the larger centers in the study were as concerned about students texting in class as teachers in Ontario. While 64% of the students in the NWT are Dene, Métis, Inuvialuit or Inuit, the others are from Southern Canada or from outside of Canada. Some of these latter students may have been born in the NWT (and are therefore deemed “Indigenous non-Aboriginal” by the Government of the Northwest Territories). Their parents, like so many Northern teachers, came North for work. But despite a non-Indigenous population, an economic power structure that privileges Western ways of being and thinking and the increasing influence of media, aspects of older social and cultural practices remain, as do traits from the Dene and Inuvialuit languages, even among those who no longer speak it. In Fort Simpson, many of the elders were born to different circumstances and some used their houses as base camps and were frequently out on the land. However, there were others in the community who rarely ventured off the island whether in a boat on the river, pickup truck on the highway, or skidoo or ATV on one of the trails that led into the bush. People’s traditional territories were often far from Fort Simpson and this factor along with intergenerational trauma—issues such as poverty, family violence and alcohol abuse resulting from several generations of Indigenous public policy (Menzies, 2007)—made any version of a return to the land after the initial systematic displacement less socially likely or financially feasible. Massey (2005) reminds us that the mobility and control of some groups with capital weakens the control
of others, rendering them as Chief of K’atl’odeeche Dene band Roy Fabian put it “refugees on their own land” at one of the public forums into a 2010–2011 across the NWT investigation of Aboriginal student achievement.

Tensions, ironies and ambiguities in the Northernvoices project

The preceding brief sketch is meant to serve as an introduction to the context in which my 2009 research project and my teaching from 1987–2001 in Fort Simpson and 2002–2007 in Yellowknife, NWT is situated. I think it is possible to get caught in the moment of teaching, indeed necessarily so, and to forget that our teaching life is constituted by, and also constitutes, the context in which we find ourselves. However, very quickly in the North, it became apparent that I must ask myself, “What am I doing here? What do I have to offer?” Wotherspoon (2006) writes about the tension in Indigenous education where school is a site for ongoing colonization and, potentially, for social transformation. Long-time Northern educational leader, Mattie McNeil (2011), of Chipewyan heritage, speaks compellingly of the importance of reflecting on power in Northern education. She asks educators and administrators and other community leaders to consider how power is both individual and collective and formally and informally recognized and then to ask who has the power and how did they get it. McNeill is interested in how the creation of equitable Northern educational systems, based on the sharing of power, might come about, and she invites people not to underestimate the potential of the power within individuals.

Ogbu (2004) posits that children from cultural groups with a history of subordination and exploitation develop an oppositional stance toward schooling. I felt this tension in the lived complexity of Northern schooling and was never sure of my role. Do I try to undermine the stance that supports the student’s integrity but contributes to the frequent practice of dropping out of school? If school is a threat to traditional ways of being and knowing, is dropping out a good
thing? In his song called “Great Big Lie,” former NWT premier Stephen Kakfwi (2006) argues that Indigenous people are not welcome in Western systems; students may not believe that their success in school actually means what the white world says it will. Despite my convictions that my politics lie left of center, my belief in the capacity for schools to offer possibilities for individual agency may belie a neoliberal heart. All of the NWT’s Dene, Métis and Inuvialuit leaders in territorial or Indigenous governments were once students in residential or day schools; they were able to take something from a negative experience and use it for the benefit of their people. Could the next generations take up the opportunity to use Western education for their own purposes, but might it be offered in a manner that is less invasive and imposing and more open to change? Could those who hold the decision-making power go further and recognize the will of the Dene, Métis, Inuvialuit and Inuit people to decide for themselves what they will use and what they must refuse? Working within the complexity of issues in the localities where I taught, I “pressed on,” as my mother would have put it, without certitude, sometimes without clarity and at times with a faltering sense of conviction. I felt that I existed within a ‘meanwhile’ temporal space in that the larger issues of Indigenous control of education were still in play. I focused my attention on the area of my limited expertise, teaching English Language Arts and considered how the way I approached my teaching might open rather than close off possibilities for my students. I did not think that I was educating them to leave (although I did think I was educating them for studies/apprenticeships past high school, which might take them away and then back again). In an effort both to understand my students and to have some books that might inspire them to read, I read a great deal of literature by First Nations, Métis, and Native American writers, and I felt that I developed some good practices that helped my students to become more confident readers. However, I felt less satisfied by my track record with writing.
Even though writing had become increasingly personally important to me over the years, my interest and passion did not transfer to many of my students. I might have taught writing out of a belief that writing could mean access to positions of power and was also a way to engage critically with privileged positions of power. This may be true of writing’s potential, but it doesn’t provide a very compelling reason to pick up a pen or sit in front of a screen in the lived reality of a school day. It’s hard to write under the conviction that it might one day be good for you and it is hard to find authentic audiences for writing practices grounded in critical pedagogy. In small Northern communities, the right thing to do is to speak, not write, to a person who is intimately connected to the individual with whom one has a concern and ask that person to pass on one’s concerns. Furthermore, although writing is also potentially expressive and could become a medium to address feelings of powerlessness (Greene, 1978) and to celebrate and enjoy life, I think some students, left to their own devices, might have been more likely to choose a different medium. In the beginning of my career, I taught Visual Art as well as English and my students were far more enthusiastic about projects I suggested in that class. In my 2009 action research project called Northernvoices, Margaret, one of the participants, might have been thinking about the expressive possibilities of writing when she suggested that in schools we offer students a glimpse of the possibilities for writing which they might want to take up later. When I was teaching writing in Fort Simpson, I read The Art of Teaching Writing by Lucy McCormick Calkins (1994) and I assigned activities that asked them to think like writers. Invariably, one of the students would point out that they were not writers and I would work to expand the definition of writer beyond
the published authors we studied in class. It would be much easier to counter that argument today with “Do you blog, email, text, and present yourself on any social networking forum? If so, then you are a writer.”

When I took up writing myself, I rose weekday mornings at 6:00 to get in a little writing before my teaching day started. What I enjoyed about writing was the game: Could I find the right words to say what I had to say? More often than not, I wrote to learn what I had to say or to explore the possibilities that existed for the saying. Increasingly in my teaching, I saw writing as a way to find out and explore what one knows; but I saw the shaping of that exploring as intimately connected to the knowing. Much to the chagrin of some of my students who wanted to write everything in point form, this focus on the shaping meant that how we wrote was as important as what we wrote. Despite my own experience with writing and some knowledge of how one might go about teaching it, I never successfully involved many of my students in the process that is writing. Of the six strands of language arts, which include reading, viewing and representing, listening and speaking, writing was the one many students evaded.

Over the years, in work with various pilot projects, subject advisory committees, and at teachers’ conferences in the NWT, it became evident that I was not alone. Other teachers felt that they too struggled to engage many of their students in writing and expressed concern that their students remained several grades below level. However, I should make it clear that many students does not mean all students. I taught avid writers who, out of their own interests, penciled novels in notebooks, composed poems on scraps of paper, and created films on their video cameras. Furthermore, I had students for whom writing was not a particular passion but they were, nonetheless, quite capable writers. Nevertheless, I had enough students who were disengaged
from the process to remain concerned about writing during my fourteen years in Fort Simpson and even during the five in Yellowknife, where the percentage of confident writers rose; I still felt that I might engage some students with writing more than I had done.

In response to the challenges of teaching writing in the North, some teachers resorted to desperate measures by asking students to fill in grammar and writing skills worksheets, convinced that “this is all I can ask them to do.” Others made more valiant efforts to reproduce “best practices” from “down South.” These best practices include process writing pedagogies, particularly the writers’ workshop as developed by Atwell (1987) and Calkins (1994). When these approaches failed to inspire writing, it was assumed that they were not implemented properly, and workshops on process pedagogy were offered. I took up various process pedagogies during my teaching practice; in particular, I tried with various degrees of success to implement the writing workshop approach. I wanted my high school students to learn how to wield words—but too few ever achieved the ability to use written English purposefully and comfortably. The years of ruminating over why this might be took me to graduate school for the second time and compelled the thinking-together about teaching writing in the NWT with eight experienced teachers that was my action research project.

**All my relations, locations and positions**

After a twenty-year absence from Southern Ontario, I returned in 2007, as a doctoral student in Education. My husband, son, and daughter, moved with me, while I attend Queen’s University, located in Kingston in traditional Anishnabe and Haudonosonee territories but also located in academe, a community comprising many places located in real, virtual and imaginary physical and social locations. My children were eight and twelve at the time of the move and had lived most of their lives and all of the time they could remember in the NWT. My husband, who
is Dene, had previously lived for two years in Victoria, B.C. where he completed a Diploma in Fine Arts; prior to that he had worked at the World Exposition in Seville, Spain, in 1992 but otherwise had lived in Denendeh.

I grew up on acreage in Union Creek, a place name on the map of Ontario that is no longer a town. My father was from the area and my mother, who was originally from Toronto, met him at the cottage where she and her family went every summer. My paternal grandmother ran a marina and, as a young man, my father delivered ice to families before the days of electricity in cottage country, in addition to working at the local saw mill. His grandfather had come from Germany, settling in the area to raise cattle and run a hotel in the final years of the local lumber industry. My grandmother told many stories of the place where I grew up, but no genealogical stories. I did know, however, that her family name went back several generations in Ontario. It is likely, as Ralston Saul (2008) points out in A Fair Country: Telling Truths about Canada, that like so many immigrant Canadians who have been in Canada for a hundred years or more, my grandmother’s family had some Indigenous ancestry. I concur with Ralston Saul’s assertion that Canada is socially and conceptually a Métis nation because Canadians have been shaped by Indigenous ideas more than is consciously recognized. There is still much to be learned, particularly, I think, in places where many people have erased the idea of Indigenous presence. In the meantime, the call to consider this erasure may come from Indigenous places where Indigenous people and newcomers come together and Indigenous presence cannot be ignored.

**Theory where the ground is shifting**

My research project derived from the recognition that “rhetorical effectiveness in a given location depends on one’s interpretation of and attitude toward place” (Vandenberg et al., 2006,
While there are many ways to explain the struggle that many Northern students seem to have with writing, it is important to remember that while Northern Indigenous students overall have greater difficulty with writing than newcomers to Deneh and the Inuvialuit territory, there are individuals for whom this is not the case. Some of my Northern students who struggled with writing were non-Indigenous, while some of my confident writers were Indigenous. One explanation for the difficulty Northern students experience with writing is the disconnection between the practices teachers employ and the place-based requirements for education in the localities where the students live. Teachers may physically move to Northern communities but remain psychically attached to localities other than the places where they teach.

Foregrounding place in this study was necessary because the land is the central relationship for the first peoples of the NWT; for the Dene, it is the place where their language and ways of being emerged. In choosing the word “place” rather than location, I follow Malpas (1999), for whom place “possesses a complex and differentiated structure made up of a set of interconnected and interdependent components—subject and object, space and time, self and other” (p.173). I concur with Basso (1996) that semiotic and symbolic systems should be considered moored in places and not separated from them. In this dissertation, I consider writing as ecology (Cooper, 2006/1986; Luce-Kapler, 2004) and as such, writing is a “web of cultural practices, social interactions, power differentials, and discursive conventions governing the production of a text” (Petraglia, 1999, p. 54). Through relational theory building with the participants in the action research, I developed further understandings about the possibility for emplaced writing pedagogies which emphasize voice. Voice, “the spoken medium of language,” (Elbow, 2008) is embodied and emplaced.
Methodology on thin ice

The action research project I undertook with experienced teachers (all non-Indigenous) from regions across the NWT investigated practices that I hoped might be more attuned to the socio-cultural and geographic context of Northern students. The research design was open and participatory and grounded by the principles of Dene relationships expressed in the *Dene Kede Curriculum* (Government of the Northwest Territories, 2003) and by possibilities for research circles (Wilson, 2008). I hoped that the writing practices might encourage a pedagogy of paying attention that might, in turn, encourage teachers to ask themselves, “Where am I and how shall I teach writing here?” But mostly, I trusted that the work we did together would push me toward greater self-understanding. Within our research circle and the unfolding design of our investigation, I worked from the framework that recognizes the web of relationality in which we all live; we depend upon one another and are vulnerable to these dependencies. I chose this particular research design because I believe that when research is directive, we lose out on the collective intelligence of the group, just as I believe that when pedagogic responsibility is directive, we lose faith in the students we never get to know.

During the 2009–2010 school year, eight experienced teachers from across the NWT met for writing workshops on a wiki, for regularly schedule MSN conversations, and for two face-to-face meetings in Yellowknife that book-ended the *Northernvoices* action research study. On the wiki, we had eight writers’ workshops that required about 45 minutes of the teachers’ time to complete, followed by 10 minutes of reflection time and a couple of minutes to post that reflection. In the writing workshops, teachers explored writing practices that I had composed to direct their attention. It was not my intention that teachers would practice activities that they were to use in their classrooms although sometimes teachers did adapt and try these activities. I created the writing practices called “voice lessons” as a methodology for the study. I drew from Reynolds
(2004), Romano, (2004), Grainger et al. (2005), and Archibald (2008), and a plethora of writing practices books from the popular presses. The MSN conversations began with a question that I posed out of ideas expressed in the reflections; after responses from the initial question, I posed other questions based on subtopics that emerged as the conversation took shape.

In our writing workshops, to some extent, we considered “Writing from this place, of this place, and for this place” (Chambers, 1999, p. 8), but to a much greater extent we thought about writing pedagogy from this place, of this place, and for this place. As Reynolds says, “It is not only places and their built-in constraints that determine certain practices, which then become habitual or taken for granted, but also the adjustments and compromises, the shifts and turns in the process of accommodating to place” (italics in original, p. 14). I concur with Luce-Kapler (2004) that writing has the potential “to orient us in the world” (p. xi). Her study illustrates how writing practices can help us interpret and realize new understandings. I contend that Northern teachers need interpretive tools particular to place: tools that will allow them to better know their places and allow Southern teachers to reach “into and across the territories of difference” (Chambers, p.10). I situate the understandings about writing that we garnered under the umbrella of post-process pedagogies (Vandenberg et al., 2006), highlighting the importance of place-responsive (Reynolds, 2004) practices that use the cultural knowledge in the Dene Kede curriculum (Government of the Northwest Territories, 2003), prior experiences, place-based frames of reference (Gruenewald, 2003b, 2003c), and relational understandings of Indigenous students (Cleary & Peacock, 1997; Deloria, 1999; Archibald, 2008). Although not all Northern students are Indigenous, relational understandings offer possibilities for pedagogy for everyone and also offer the opportunity to reevaluate research practices (Smith, 1999).
Fellow travelers

The participants for my study from the regions outside of Yellowknife, the capital of the NWT, were recruited from a pool of teachers who were participating in a subject advisory committee for the selection of writing samples to accompany the NWT curricula for Grades 7 through 9. I had hoped to have seven teachers in the study—one from each of the five regions and two from Yellowknife recruited through their district boards. I began with fourteen at the first face-to-face workshop but after the workshop, three left the study as they were already overextended. Two participants left the study because dates and times were an issue; in a third case, the lack of internet access in the community for over a month led to the participant’s withdrawal. The participants who stayed came from six of the eight regions in the NWT. It should be noted, however, that that the divisional board in the other two regions had already undertaken major reading and writing projects of their own at the time that my study took place. Of those eight participants, Liz, Dave, Tom, Annette and Karen had moderate participation (by this I mean they participated over the course of the study but only intermittently); however, their contributions within the group were appreciated as they sparked and added to the conversations as they were able. The voices you will hear most often in the dissertation are the participants most involved with the study who had regular participation, Margaret, Laurence and Eric.

The teachers from the study are given pseudonyms in this dissertation to protect their identities and for the same reason will be given only one or two characterizations to offer some sense of who they are as their voices appear in the dissertation. The teachers had from 3–32 years teaching experience, although most had more than ten. All the teachers were originally from Western and Eastern Canada, (none from Ontario and Québec); many were originally from rural areas or small towns. They had had many travel experiences outside of Canada; Laurence, for example, had travelled to Europe seven times, in addition to many other places. The teachers also
travelled within Canada often to see family and to attend conferences. Many continued to take
courses after graduating; several had Master’s degrees. Eric was currently taking his Master’s
degree online in addition to participating in the Northernvoices study. In terms of travel within
the NWT, all came to Yellowknife for meetings, but many had travelled to other places in the
NWT for pleasure and also for school trips, most often sports events. Many had been involved
with school trips outside of the NWT. All were very busy with extracurricular activities such as
working at school fundraising bingos, guiding yearbook clubs, and leading local fiddling classes.
They were often also very busy members of their communities in roles such as big buddies,
coaches of various sports or drama and music clubs, or members of library and festival boards.

The teachers in the study shared some similar realities in their Northern schools, in
varying degrees. Many identified attendance as a problem in their schools and some considered
the availability of good resources to be an issue. Many had some experience with the vagaries of
teaching in places where the building of a new school or renovation of an older one means
teaching under trying physical conditions. All had some experience with the ups and downs of the
availability of information communications technology (ICT) that one comes to rely on in schools
after one has had access. All expressed enjoyment of the community spirit of the places where
they lived and taught.

**Possibilities beyond the solid ground of previous teaching generations**

As difficult as it can be, for teachers from elsewhere to work in the relative isolation of
small Northern schools, this isolation can also allow for possibilities that may not exist in more
densely populated centers closer to hubs of control. In the North, it is possible to think about the
school as nested within a community which in turn belongs to the surrounding territory with
which the Dene, Métis and Inuvialuit identify. In this sense, the classroom is not only nested
within the school, the district and the education department. Within the frame of complexity thinking, teaching and learning systems begins with bodily subsystems which are nested within individuals, within collectivities and bodies of knowledge which include understandings outside of the subjective disciplines of schools. All of these systems are further nested within the body politic and then the species and the biosphere (Davis, Sumara & Luce-Kapler, 2008). The success of our work beyond the action research circle may well depend upon the ability of teachers to see their schools the former way so that the ‘placeness’ of their school can be constituted outside of Western bureaucratic and epistemic structures. Many Northern policies for education in the North, since the Territories inception in 1970, have called for an education founded on Northern identities that will grant Northerners access to the wage economy; this view is compatible with many educational jurisdictions that aspire to a culturally responsive pedagogy that will allow students to fit into existing and emerging economic structures. However, over the years, I have heard Northern elders, among others, ask for something else—the right to determine who they want their young people to become.

Some Indigenous jurisdictions in the North have taken more control of their education than others, working to ensure the ongoing use of their language and directing their own educational affairs, but the dynamic is more troubled in some localities, owing to small populations or the mix of cultures, which sometimes includes more than one Indigenous group or a large population of non-Indigenous people. Some communities are economically better off than others, although there are those who think the social, environmental and ethical costs of hosting multinational corporations outweigh the economic benefits most of which flow out of the North. But no communities, despite their degree of self-governance, live outside of social, economic and political networks; places are always in relation to other places, and no community can escape human finitude and historicity. Massey (2005) reminds us that gender, race and economic status
also determine how one might respond to relationships with other places and define the spaces within a locality where one might feel out of place. The teachers of the Northwest Territories work within the differing dynamic of complex, Northern localities.

The research project I undertook to inquire into place-responsive writing pedagogy within the lived experience of the ethical know-how of teaching is not nested within any imagined coherent framework for all of education in the NWT. Like Caputo, I do not believe that we stand on solid ground. “I teach; therefore there will be difficulty” Fowler declares (2006, p. 18). Following Caputo (1987; 2000), I am committed to restoring life to its original difficulty—a life that admits no easy answer, metaphysical or scientific—to the difficulties of making one’s way through the contingencies of a life; like Fowler (2006), I am committed to acknowledging that difficulty in teaching. This difficulty in the Northern locations where my research took place is not just poor student attendance, low graduation rates, or the tension in education that is meant to maintain cultural integrity and ensure a prosperous North, but rather, is the flux of lived experience and the reality of the contingent unity of meaning that is “always liable to undoing and disseminative dispersal” (p. 19). If there is no ahistorical essential structure, it may seem that there is no hope for the individual since there is nothing that can be liberated. The bureaucratic worldview of Western schooling invests a great deal of professional effort in the “business of coming up with normative ideas” (p. 29) and in “developing administrative practices and professional competencies” (p. 30) to produce individuals who meet normative standards. Caputo draws from Foucault to assert we may still ask who we are but rather than hope for a determinate or limiting answer, what is at stake is the right to answer that question for oneself by keeping the question open.

In the next chapter, I will sketch a history of the larger Western systems of teaching and learning in the NWT. It is not my intent to critique what has come before and then offer a
comprehensive solution for how things might be, but I would like to touch on the historical and political dimensions of place which, for the most part, were absent from our *Northernvoices* conversations. It is possible to live daily realities in a school without much conscious reflection on the historic dimension, especially in contemporary climes of accountability where it is not possible to live without consciousness of the demands of the broader bureaucratic system, or conceptions of the body of knowledge that constitutes a subject area—concerns that may overshadow the exigencies of time and place. Without knowledge of the history that Foucault maintains “traps” us, we cannot possibly keep the question of who are we in play.

I am a non-Indigenous researcher who was formerly a teacher within a Western educational system in a Dene place populated by Dene, Métis, and non-Dene people. By defining the NWT as an Indigenous place, I do not defer to population census to determine the dominant cultural mode of the NWT, nor do I defer to systems of Western governance to determine who may claim the right to determine the nature of the place. For me, time on the land, land ‘title’ as determined by honest measures with sovereign Indigenous nations, and the interpretation of the land from people who have been in intimate relationship with it since the beginning of storied time are what constitute place.

I believe a historic overview of the curricular landscape is important because undergirding my dissertation is the suspicion that Southern non-Indigenous teachers often teach and “speak from an imaginal space derived from and created by the cognitive habits of Europe” (Chambers, 1999, p. 6). It is not, simply, that processes and practices are transplanted from elsewhere, for in many ways they are already emplaced in the structures of Northern schooling through “the Eurocentric instrumentalities of previous generations” (Chambers, 1999, p. 6). I will not offer a new model for Northern writing pedagogies, but I will suggest that through openness to the emplaced realities of Northern classrooms, new possibilities may emerge.
revisioning of broader systems for education within Denendeh and the Inuvialuktun territory may come about through future work taken on by the young people, currently learning with the teachers of the Northwest Territories. In the meantime, orienting writing pedagogy toward the development of student writers’ voices can lead to emplaced writing practices more likely to invite Northern students to engage with writing than one-size-fits-all writing practices from elsewhere.
Chapter 2
To Summon Ourselves in Resoluteness, Humility, and Compassion

In this chapter, I take up the historical dimension of place. Despite that I have organized the history into “eras,” Merleau-Ponty (1973) asserts that history is always ambiguous and never finite. History has fallen out of favor in this current age—too “yesterday” and “old school” to maintain interest for long. My formal education in History ended after Grade 10, by which time I felt I had memorized enough dates to serve me a lifetime. In the spirit of a hermeneutics determined to “cut its own path, to break with established habits, to think in a radical, groundbreaking way” (Caputo, 1987, p. 219), the irony that humdrum history might allow this is appealing. I am aware that the irony circles back on me because in the creation of this overview of education in the Northwest Territories, I take a Western view of history as chronology, cognizant that embedded in this view is the sense that chronology is important because it “allows me to go backwards to explain why something is happening today” (Smith, 2006, p. 30). I do not entirely subscribe to this causal view, but rather prefer McLeod’s (2007) perspective that “the past is alive and individuals must continuously reconsider their relationship to it” (p. 168).

Considering my relationship to the past in Fort Simpson

When I stepped off the plane in Fort Simpson in 1987, I did not think of myself as working within a larger social, political and historical learning system. I could hardly wait to get to the school and begin setting up my classes. I also was curious about the new place where I would live, and wandered around the town looking for clues to what might have transpired in various places. One time, as I stood at the gate of the small, untended cemetery behind what once was a residential school hostel and was then an office building, I was wondering why so few people looked after the cemetery. There was some evidence of care but in comparison to the large
community cemetery, the grass grew tall and very few flowers or wreaths were laid in this smaller, older one. The mounds of earth were dotted with little greyed wooden crosses. I became conscious of the hostel behind me as I stood there pondering. My students said it was haunted and reported hearing babies crying as they walked past at night. I had thought the crying signified the sorrow of children missing their families and their ways of being, separated as they were for at least 10 months at a time. Suddenly, I understood from my knowledge of the historic impact of imported diseases on Indigenous people and the imagined awareness of the close, cramped conditions of the hostel that the place must have been rife with illness. Those small mounds might have been the children who never went home from residential school, children who suffered and died far away from the care of those who loved them.

In addition to understanding gleaned from imaginative interpretation of a neglected cemetery, the impact of residential schools became obvious in lived encounters. At parent-teacher interviews, I felt a cold distance between me and some of the parents. I was used to being described as cheerful, friendly, and tactful so I was surprised when some parents seemed defensive before I had even uttered one word. I was in my twenties with late 1980s fluffy hair, silk blouses, fringed scarves with metallic thread and big, dangly earrings: To my eyes there was nothing threatening about me. My view of myself is substantiated by Wotherspoon’s (2008) study of non-Indigenous teachers working in Aboriginal contexts who perceived themselves primarily kind, deserving, and helpful. Giroux (1988), too, warns that the good teacher may be a good manager invested in the normative practices of standardized curriculum working against transformative practices. I might have served my students and their parents better had I had a greater knowledge of the history of Western teaching in that place. But even better intentions and more awareness than I had then would not have allowed me to operate outside of the traditions in
which I found myself. However, one cannot trouble those traditions without a clear sense of what they are. What follows is a brief history of Western education in the Northwest Territories.

**For as long as the rivers flow: Dene, Inuvialuit, and Inuit Education**

Chronology might not be important at all if a traditional Indigenous person were telling the story of education in the Northwest Territories. S/he would no doubt look through a different lens if she were interested at all in thinking about Western education. The work of Marie Battiste (Battiste 1995; 2000; Battiste & Youngblood, 2009), for example, is committed to decolonizing Indigenous education through the valuing and revitalization of Indigenous knowledge. The Dene, Inuvialuit, and Inuit of the Northwest Territories have their conceptions of emplaced history and had their own system of education before the arrival of Europeans. Warner (2006) contends that Indigenous ways of knowing, “in contrast to Western educational practices, are acquired and represented through the context of place, revolving around the needs of community and the best efforts to actualize a holistic understanding of the community’s environment” (p. 150). Although epistemologically fundamentally different from Western education, Indigenous education functioned for the same reason: to transmit “the interests, purposes, information, skill, and practices of the mature members…by means of communication of habits of doing, thinking, and feeling …to the younger” (Dewey, 1916/1966, p. 3). Dewey added, incidentally, that an additional aim of progressive education is “to take part in correcting unfair privilege and unfair deprivation, not to perpetuate them” (1916/1966, p. 116). The ‘policies’ that governed and continue to govern the practices of traditional pedagogy were passed along through narrative.

Indigenous education is embedded in Dene, Inuvialuit, and Inuit and later Métis stories that are carried and transformed through the collective memory of the people. With the coming of the Europeans, a Western way of being—communicated through the written word in rationalist
forms and enacted through the spoken words and deeds of the mature members of a completely
different society—was transmitted to the young people of the North. Ways of being that as
Greenwood and de Leeuw (2007), argue were in contrast to the development of Indigenous
citizenry; one need only consider how Western notions of ‘school readiness’ embedded as they
are in Western values, beliefs and assumptions might create cognitive dissonance and foster a
lack of connection and thereby the ability to make meaning out of Indigenous ways of being.

I had some opportunity to watch Dene elders over the years in Fort Simpson; for
example, upon occasion I watched women scrape a moose hide, prepare the solution for tanning
it and then smoke it over a low fire. There was little talking when they worked in contrast to the
behavior of cultural instructors and resource people who instructed as part of school activities.
These cultural instructors explained the context for the activity, clarified the procedure as they
went, answered questions and encouraged participation. When you scrape a hide, I learned first-
hand in the school’s culture-based activities, too much pressure means you might leave a deep
incision that will affect the quality of the smoked hide. In Western schools, experimentation
before one is ready to perform a task is encouraged because the process is taken out of the context
where a mistake is costly. While my learning in Indigenous and school contexts broadened my
understandings of how people make their way in the world, it was not tied to an authentic
economic reason to learn or to a need to find my place within a collective identity.

Traditional educational practices are based on the principles that the Alberta Education
Department (2005) recognizes in their document *Our words, our ways: Teaching First Nations,
Métis and Inuit learners*. Generally, Indigenous education takes a holistic approach, is founded on
observation and based in the community’s resources, is experiential and considers multiple
perspectives. These Indigenous educational principles remain in educational contexts other than
schools in Fort Simpson, as does evidence of Western education from previous eras. When I
arrived in 1987, the mission house for the Anglican mission was still standing and other presences in town also reminded me of those times. Once, digging in my garden after moving from one home to another, I was surprised to find earthworms. I learned that earthworms existed in a few plots in town and there were speculations that they had arrived with some of the early flowers that one particular missionary’s wife had brought with her. She was attributed to bringing the ivory columbines that existed in a few gardens around town and the many delphiniums that existed not only in many gardens but had also taken root in the tall, grassy field by the downtown airstrip. I deeply appreciated the waving, bobbing heads of shades of blue delphinium on warm summer evenings in Fort Simpson, but I recognize that their arrival signified nothing as innocuous and lovely as they were.

The route to salvation: The early days of Western education in the North 1861–1950

In the early days of the European colonization of Canada, the Roman Catholic, Anglican and Methodist churches established missions near the forts so local Indigenous people could attend church and school services when they had business with the fur trading companies; the North was no different. Missionaries made their way North even before Confederation. The first mission school in the Northwest Territories, a log building erected in 1860–1861 (Macpherson, 1991), was staffed at the end of the nineteenth century by Anglican Bishop Bompas and his wife Charlotte Selina Bompas. While Bishop Bompas travelled throughout the district by canoe and dog sled, bringing Christianity to the people, Selina remained behind to conduct school services as needed (Library and Archives Canada, 2009). In Selina’s (1886) book Owindia, written for one of the adopted children who came under the care of the Bompases during their lengthy tenure in Fort Simpson, references to “the little dark-eyed children [who] are with but few exceptions, baptized Christians” (p. 24) makes evident the goal of the mission schools. She writes of the
children pouring over their Syllabic prayer books to “find their place in the little Hymn books” and adds that “the anthems that the children sang were as familiar to them as to English children.”

When it became clear that mission schools were not an effective way to convert the Indigenous population to Christianity, owing to the short length of time that people attended, the churches developed residential schools. In Lower Canada, the French had already introduced residential schools in the early 17th century, and yet despite the lack of success by the French, the Canadian imperial policy of the 1830s, 1840s, and 1850s in Upper Canada provided the rationale for the government’s involvement in the development of residential schools (Milloy, 1999) in the rest of Canada. With this change in the long-standing policy that the British had adopted in the Proclamation of 1763, that is the recognition of Indigenous people as self-governing within the empire, the relationship with Indigenous people was reconfigured. Indigenous people were no longer viewed as business partners in the fur trade or allies in times of war; by 1857, education was seen as central to the process that would imbue Indigenous people with the characteristics of Victorian civilization—industry and knowledge—although it was clear from the outset that Indigenous people were to be educated for the lowest rungs of Canadian society (Barman et al., 1986).

According to James sákēj Youngblood Henderson (1995), the Indigenous treaties with the Imperial crown and later the Constitutional Order of Canada created an educational right and a constitutional obligation to fund that educational right. He argues that Indigenous people did not give up their obligations toward education to the Crown. The Indigenous educational system remained in customary law and was never relinquished. Education in Indigenous society was a family obligation; Youngblood Henderson argues that the right of Indigenous families to educate their children is a separate right distinct from federal or provincial government’s responsibilities to educate the children of immigrants. To make his case, he references the treaties enacted during
Queen Victoria’s reign. He cites: “Her Majesty agrees to maintain a school on each reserve hereby made whenever the Indians of the reserve should desire it.” Beginning in 1873, there is a subtle shift, he says, in the language that moves from Indigenous choice to Crown obligations. By 1899, the commissioners of Treaty 8 stated that the government policy on education was as strong as the treaty. Youngblood Henderson argues that with no special provision in these later treaties, Indigenous people appeared to accept federal choice in education.

The residential school system grew out of the parallel development of the churches’ desire to spread Christianity and the state’s desire to transform the ontology and values of Indigenous people so they could be, as Duncan Campbell Scott, the Head of Indian Affairs in 1920 phrased it “absorbed into the body politic” (Milloy, 1999, p. 47). By leaving the teaching to the missionaries, this transformation could be achieved cheaply (Barman, Hébert, & McCaskill, 1986; Milloy, 1999). In the North, shortly after the Anglicans opened the mission day school, the first residential school (and also the one with the longest record of continuous operation) was opened by the Grey Nuns of Montreal on October 7, 1867, in Fort Providence, Northwest Territories (Macpherson, 1991). Other Roman Catholic and Anglican residential schools followed, but as education was not compulsory, many Dene, Inuvialuit, and Inuit children continued to live on the land with their parents. Mission day schools and residential schools remained in operation simultaneously, particularly in the eastern Arctic where residential schools were established later than in the west. Duncan Campbell Scott was not as eager to intervene in the traditional lifestyle of Northern Indigenous peoples as he was with Southern Indigenous peoples, as the hunting and trapping lifestyle supported by the fur industry was the only protection against total welfare dependency.

In the North, the government’s arrangement with the churches was a little different in that the churches built the schools independently and then approached the government for funding.
The funding was forthcoming, but there were delays by officials who questioned the logic of schooling in a Northern isolated region. The amendment of the Indian Act in 1920 made school compulsory, ushering in the era of Indian agents and the R.C.M.P. arriving at Indigenous camps by boat and later by airplane to take children seven years old and older away to school (Barman et al., 1986). This amendment, along with the devastating impact of the Spanish flu on the Dene (related to me through oral stories in Fort Simpson) may have meant a greater influx of students in the schools. Furthermore, social services initiatives were not generously funded, leaving Northern people to support themselves through the trading companies’ credit system during down times in the fur trade (Milloy, 1999). Northerners could get family allowance after 1922, provided that they sent their children to school.

The residential schools were underfunded, creating poor health conditions that resulted in illness and death as children contracted diseases during epidemics that swept through the schools (Miller, 1999). The students were often neglected due to understaffing, and discipline in the schools too often crossed the lines into abuse. The level of education achieved at the schools was much lower than in non-Indigenous schools; in fact, many students did not advance past Grade 3, owing to a number of factors, including the poor teaching qualifications of the missionaries (Barman et al.). The children spent only two to four hours a day on their academic studies and the rest of the day on chores to maintain the facility. Their first language was not the language of instruction and they were taught with material that was not relevant to their experiences and in ways that were not respectful of their ways of being (Barman et al.).

During my 14 years in Fort Simpson, I heard a few first-hand accounts about life in residential school. Charlie, the custodian at my school, often stopped by first thing in the morning or at the end of his work day to tell me stories or teach me Dene words. He told me that when he went to residential school, he was not a small child. He was “this high,” he said, indicating his
shoulder, which might have made him at least ten, since Charlie was a tall man. “Boy, those nuns,” he said shaking his head. “One of them, she was this high,” he said, indicating a height much shorter than his shoulder, “And I was this high,” he exclaimed showing me shoulder height again. “She gave me the strap, and I didn’t like it. No boy, I didn’t like it,” he said shaking his head, “so I ran away. Stayed there, three days,” he said, and we both laughed until he resumed his sweeping.

When I arrived in 1987 the school had recently extended from K–9 to Grade 10. Students still went to Yellowknife for Grades 11 and 12 in the territorial high school that had been established in 1958, but some members of the community continued to lobby for further grade extensions. Many parents expressed concern that students from Fort Simpson got lost in the larger community; however, some wanted to continue the practice of sending students for senior grades out of concern that the smaller high school would never be able to offer the degree of specialized courses that the larger center could offer. By the early ’90s, the Fort Simpson school became a full high school with students from the region coming for grades 10–12. By the mid 90s, two of the larger communities in the region also had full K–12 schools, and the four smaller communities (population of 65–250 people) had schools that went from K–10. Fort Simpson had two student hostels built in the early 1990s, although only one was ever fully occupied since by the time the hostels were built, the two other larger communities in the region were offering Grade 12. Other regions across the NWT were following the same pattern owing to the government’s devolution of power, so by 1994 the hostel in Yellowknife closed and the school became a town school rather than regional high school.
Inroads in the frontier: The federal years 1944–1979

In the 1940s and 1950s, federal government dollars were invested in Northern infrastructure although no long-term commitment to the maintenance of that infrastructure was established. Upon many occasions, my personal experience bore witness to the need for upkeep of aging infrastructure. During my four years in Kingston, my family had the opportunity to go back to Fort Simpson twice as my husband John, an artist, and I were invited to participate in a youth conference. John delivered carving workshops and I offered eight different writing sessions over two-and-a-half days while our children enjoyed the holiday with friends and relatives. The second time we went up, it was touch and go as to whether the conference was going to happen on time. A water main had broken just outside the school so the school was without water. As visiting conference goers camp overnight in classrooms, access to bathrooms is essential. The town has enough bed and breakfasts and hotels for the presenters, but not enough for the 250 students who attend the conference. At any rate, the costs for student accommodation would be prohibitive because many schools had already paid for expensive transportation. During the time we lived in Fort Simpson, the municipal government was always repairing the aging water system or roads somewhere, so the burst water main was nothing new; there wasn’t enough money to rip up anything and start again, so pipes were patched year after year.

The preceding illustration is meant to show how the initial federal involvement in the NWT was not thought-through in terms of sustainability or in terms of what the Indigenous people desired. When the federal government took control of education away from the churches in the mid’40s, they built many more hostels as many Dene, Métis and Inuvialuit people did not live full-time in the communities, spending a great deal of the year on the land hunting and trapping. Under Jean Lesage, the Minister of Northern Affairs, worn-out Northern residential schools such as the one in Fort Providence where 110 children slept in two rooms, were replaced.
with an expanded federal system of smaller hostels. The hostels were run by either the Anglican or Roman Catholic churches (Macpherson, 1991); only the hostel built to serve the new territorial vocational high school in Yellowknife was non-denominational. The hostels that still exist to this day in regional centers to accommodate students from outlying communities are now non-denominational.

The Dene, Métis, Inuvialuit, and Inuit had been asking for day schools for their children for some time but the federal government did not recognize the need to redefine what it meant to educate Indigenous people (Battiste, 1995). A few non-denominational schools operated by the mining companies for the benefit of their employees were already up and running in the North, starting in 1938-1939, with a one-room schoolhouse in the newly incorporated gold mining town of Yellowknife (Macpherson, 1991). With mining and the development of an infrastructure in the North, more and more non-Indigenous people moved there and with them came the desire to control their own affairs, including education. Stephen Kakfwi asserted in 1977 that “the schools operate more in the interests of transients and civil servants than of the Dene of the communities…For instance, a civil servant may move with his family for two or three years and demand that his children be taught in the standards of Southern Canada” (Watkins, 1977, p. 121).

In my own time, I was witness to this desire to control affairs when there was a public outcry in Fort Simpson (as well as in other large centers including Yellowknife) when the Department of Education introduced an additional Grade 10 Social Studies course called Northern Studies. In public meetings and petitions, some parents protested this compulsory course many called “Native Studies.” At issue was not only the vision for education specific to place and the vision of education as the same as ‘everywhere else’ but also the racism that continues to thread its way through Canadian society today.
Teachers who taught in the North in the federal era who contributed to Macpherson’s *Dreams and Visions* saw themselves as “pioneers” in a “frontier” land. Many of the teachers interviewed in that book stayed in one community for only two or three years before travelling with the relative ease of Northern air travel from one fully furnished teacherage in one Northern locality to another. Speaking about why teachers move around in the North so frequently, John McArthur, who worked in Port Harrison from 1961-1965, wrote: “I think that somebody operating out of his own cultural context definitely runs out of steam” (Macpherson, p. 211). When it was too much for the teachers, they could always leave while the children remained in their communities to await the next planeload of teachers.

For the most part, the teachers in Macpherson’s compilation who worked in the North in the ’50s and ’60s relied on normative Southern educational practices—as is mostly the reality today. Teachers may have felt that Indigenous ways of being and knowing were inadequate for the new development of the Territory and could not see, as Aikenhead (2006) contends, that Indigenous children are advantaged by their cultural identity, not disadvantaged. The children in the classrooms in those years and later were taught by people who did not share their language and were not a part of the ongoing social relationships of the community and yet those teachers had the power to construct and modify their understandings of who they were (Kirkness, 1992; Battiste, & Henderson, 2000, as cited in Bouvier & Karlenzig, 2006).

Some teachers living among the Dene, Métis, Inuvialuit, and Inuit, however, did make changes in their practices. Gerald and Ann Mulders, in Macpherson’s Northern collection, wrote of their experiences in Fort Providence from 1960–1963. One thing that Gerald regretted is initially following the directive of his “boss” in Ottawa forbidding the children to speak their language. When he realized this was not acceptable to the people of Fort Providence, he stopped “compounding the error” (p. 228). Some changes in the ways teachers saw themselves are evident.
in several of the interviewed teachers’ comments, but most teachers did not see that “Indigenous knowledge and ways of teaching and learning offer a wealth of interesting possibilities for all individuals—Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal” (Battiste, 2000, as cited in Bouvier & Karlenzig, 2006, p. 226).

**Blazing new trails and traversing old ones: The territorial years: 1968–the present**

By the end of the 1960s, the structure of the Territorial government was in place and the Department of Education assumed the responsibility for the schools in the Mackenzie District in 1969 and in the eastern Arctic in 1970. School building continued and a new system of education was envisioned. The 1972 *Survey of Education* (Northwest Territories Education) made recommendations for the precedence of Native languages, local control of education, development of curriculum materials relevant to pupils’ lifestyles, and introduction of Dene, Métis, Inuvialuit and Inuit cultures into the school. Under Paul Robinson, the Chief of Curriculum, an elementary level Northern curriculum was developed in the early ’70s along with many resources, such as a series of readers based on Northern people in Northern situations to replace the *Fun with Dick and Jane* (Gray & Hill, n.d.) still in circulation (Chalmers, 1999).

A commitment to hire Dene, Métis, Inuvialuit, and Inuit personnel that came out of the 1972 report saw the creation of classroom assistant positions and later the development of a two-year teacher education program (now extended to four) first at the Thebacha campus of Arctic College in Fort Smith and then at Aurora campus in Yellowknife. Initiatives were taken to instruct students in their first language in the primary years; this practice remains to this day in Nunavut and has been further developed. But in Denedeh and the Inuvialuit territory there are eight official languages other than English, French and Inuktitut and diversity and dialects within these eight oral non-written languages. Immersion was a daunting task for the Indigenous
teachers who took on those early classes in the western NWT and eventually immersion classrooms disappeared although this commitment to immersion in the Dene language has been rekindled nearly forty years later. The degree of cross-cultural practices also varied greatly across the North, and in 1974, Robinson left after five years, frustrated that change in the North was taking so long. Ambivalence about the goals of education in the North remained. In general, the larger question of who defines what knowledge and ways of teaching and learning are valued remained unchanged through this time; Western practices prevailed. Battiste (1995) reminds us that Indigenous education “relied on a complex relationship to traditions, place, and time” (p. ix).

Teachers from the South continued to arrive steeped in their own culture without any formal frameworks for critiquing their practices and, I contend, could easily find variants of familiar educational traditions in place. They had no cultural orientation when they arrived, there were few resources in the schools, living conditions were often much tougher than they were used to, they were separated from friends and family and other colleagues by vast distances and in the end, for the most part, they taught the way they would have in the South, for reasons they thought were right. Struggling with the cultural dissidence of their new place, I wonder if it occurred to them that the children lived a heightened form of this discomforting experience on a daily basis in school.

At the Berger Inquiry in the 1970s, Kakfwi (1986/1977) expressed the elders’ concerns that the young people who were educated in school were losing their language and that they, the elders, were unable to communicate with them. “They saw that, if the situation remained unchanged, they as a people would be destroyed in a relatively short time” (p. 143). Dissatisfaction with education continued and in public hearings held by the Government of the NWT in 1982 to investigate the effectiveness of education, Dene, Métis, Inuvialuit, and Inuit people expressed disappointment in a system that was viewed as fundamentally assimilationist
(Chisholm, 1994). That dissatisfaction is still expressed by some today, although I also have heard concern from Dene and non-Dene that the education system in the North is not on par with the system down South. A phrase I have heard over the years is that “A Northern Grade 12 diploma is not worth the paper it’s written on."

In 1981, public hearings were held to inquire into all aspects of educational practices in the Northwest Territories. Given the identified educational problems of the NWT, which included (and still do) high rates of drop out and poor attendance, 15 recommendations were made in Learning Traditions and Change (1982), the document that came out of the public forums. Some of the major recommendations that came to pass included: a change in administrative structure in the Department of Education, a decentralizing of power to divisional boards, the creation of an Arctic college, and inclusive practices in Special Education. Major recommendations that did not come to pass included a call for the Department of Education to regard research in curriculum development as a funding priority and a demand for cross-cultural orientation for teachers. Another recommendation was for instruction in Indigenous languages: in the western NWT, the second-language aspect was taken up as a compulsory second-language course but immersion in the language was not long lasting owing perhaps to the difficulty finding instructors but also perhaps to the diversity in languages: there are five Dene languages: Chipewyan, Gwich’in, North Slavey, South Slavey, and Tlicho and dialectical differences within them. There is also Inuvialuktun in the delta and Inuinnaqtun to the east, in addition to one Southern Indigenous language, Cree in the southern Northwest Territories. Immersion was implemented in the eastern arctic where there are dialectical differences of the Inuinnaqtun and Inuktitut.

From 1985–1991, the Department of Education devolved responsibilities to the divisional boards so that local people could assume more authority for their education. Under this new relationship, the Department continued to develop curriculum outcomes (sometimes creating
them from scratch and at other times drawing from other Western Canadian jurisdictions), but it was up to local boards to create programs of study and schools to create courses. Since the late 1990s, the NWT has been a part of the Western and Northern Canadian Protocol, a meeting of all Western and Northern provinces, the Northwest Territories and the Yukon to create broad curricular frameworks for all subject disciplines and grades. In English, the NWT creates their K-9 curricula from that framework but uses Alberta’s curricula for Grades 10–12.

In 1991, the Government document *Our Students, Our Future: An Educational Framework* (Northwest Territories Education), described a tension in the lives of the Indigenous students. For the writers of that document, students “find themselves caught between the ‘old ways’ and the demands of modern society” (p. 5). The *New Strategic Plan of the Northwest Territories 2005–2015* (Government of the Northwest Territories) which calls for the preservation of Northern languages and culture and also for education that will allow access to the growing resource-based wage economy implies that the tension still exists. Scholars such as Sandy Grande (2000) might point to the language in the territorial government documents that frames Indigenous education in terms of identity theory, which obscures the reality of Indigenous people as sovereign people with treaty rights. Framing Indigenous people as just another group among marginalized peoples or as one more cultural group that requires appropriate responses within Western schools denies the critical difference that belongs to the first people of this continent. They can make constitutional claims that disadvantaged others or multicultural groups cannot.

**How might Northern education be otherwise?**

Dene, Métis, Inuvialuit, and Inuit traditional education is integrated across the life-world and as such does not come with the accoutrements of Western education—concerns about literacy
levels, standards and norms, achievement gaps and curriculum documents, as a few examples. But it does not strike me as likely, however, that any version of Northern education today can exist beyond the influence of Western educational ideas. Caputo tells us that when a particular story has held sway for long periods of time one should look for the violence that enforces it. Violence exists and has existed in Western education in the Northwest Territories. For Caputo, the only response to institutions that discriminate against and marginalize some people is subversion. However, Dauenhauer (1991) argues that institutions have a practical necessity and the daunting task for the people of any society is to determine what is of use and what is not. We can “intervene in ongoing processes, to keep institutions in process, to keep the forms of life from eliminating the life-form they are supposed to house” (Caputo, 1987, p. 263). The teacher is constrained by the larger system of which s/he is a part, but s/he is not without agency. Caputo says we can learn to be wary of power and be alert to those who are victimized and to bring this awareness to the larger learning systems.

As long as pedagogy in the Northwest Territories is primarily oriented toward solving problems, then levels of literacy lower than their Southern counterparts and graduation rates will set the agenda for improvement of Northern education. Possibilities exist for a more balanced, respectful and relevant Northern education system if we shift the emphasis in education to “community-level strengths and resource richness” (Villegas, 2009, p. 47) and away from achievement gaps and deficits measured by standardized tests and compared against results from Southern Canada. Donald (2009) argues that Indigenous education must be integrated with its philosophical foundations intact. What would happen if we put Dene, Métis, Inuvialuit, and Inuit philosophical values at the heart of the curriculum and insisted that all aspects of what we do in school must bear them in mind? What would happen if education in the Northwest Territories was primarily oriented toward the maintenance of right relations?
Villegas (2009) argues for Indigenous education in Alaska to be centered on an individual’s sense of belonging to self, to others and to the world. This is very much like the principles of the *Dene Kede curriculum*, where the learner’s relationship with the self, with others, with the land and with the spirit world (understood as a private affair, the purpose of which is akin to Cajete’s (1994) call for education in which one finds one’s true face and one’s true vocation over a life-time). In the *Inuuquatigiit curriculum*, the Inuit and Inuvialuit curriculum developed in 1996, “the family, the community, the self” is the fundamental orientation for learning; this orientation implies respect and responsibility for one’s relations and could be at the center of concerns for Northern education. In the *Dene Kede curriculum*, we learn: “In order to survive and live life to the fullest [all] students must develop respectful relationships with the Land, the spiritual World, Other people and themselves.” In contrast to the understandings from the religious eras of Western education in the NWT, relationship with the spiritual world means recognition that education follows a holistic orientation that acknowledges the importance of diverse worldviews and the interconnectedness of all human beings and the more-than-human world. The Dene relationship with the land includes enjoyment, capacity, understanding, appreciation and respect for the land as well as familiarity with Dene history of the land. Inuvialuit understandings are similar in these overarching respects; quite different in specific practices.

In this dissertation, I reference Dene understandings over Inuvialuit understandings because my personal experience is derived from teaching and living among the Dene, although I acknowledge understandings that have come from some Inuvialuit carvers, friends of my husband and of our family. In Indigenous understandings, the relationship with the self means that one develops integrity in relationships, maintains humility and is conscious of how one’s behavior affects others. In relationship with others one knows, respects and enjoys others, recognizes
similarities and differences learns to be generous, puts group needs ahead of individual needs and respects elders.

I took these understandings from the *Dene Kede curriculum*, but they were very much a part of what I heard and observed during my time in Fort Simpson. The call for ethical comportment was an extremely common topic in public addresses by elders and other social, cultural and political leaders in Fort Simpson. I often heard it resonating through such diverse topics as self-governance, alcohol use, the way things were when people still lived primarily on the land (rather than in town) and economic development possibilities in the region. Often what I heard said more about the importance of being wise than amassing information. Vandenberg et al. (2006) remind us that “rhetorical effectiveness in a given location depends on one’s interpretation of and attitude toward place” (p. 13); in Northern places, it is crucial that one’s attitude remain respectful and open so as not to shut down possibilities and learning opportunities for students.

When I say that despite the constraints of a hierarchical, bureaucratic system teachers should not deny their agency, I do not mean to deny the difficulties of operating within just such a system. What I do contend is that teachers have a tremendous ability to respond to what is in front of them. Varela, Thompson, and Rosch (1993) in *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience* explore the “twofold sense of embodiment” (p.228) that is the communication between cognitive science and mindfulness/awareness practices. The guiding metaphor that they take up as they explore the possibilities for a consideration of groundlessness in Western scientific culture is “laying down a path in walking.” Mindfulness/awareness traditions or enactive cognitive science can reveal to us that there is no such thing as self-interest. Even the vision of the self that they contend prevails in the social sciences—the economic self determined to get the most in life for the least cost—occurs only in relation to the other. People who appear to be self-interested as opposed to other-interested are struggling according to mindfulness
practitioners to “maintain the sense of a separate self by engaging in self-referential relationships with the other” (p. 257). While Varela draws from Eastern traditions far different from Indigenous traditions, the embodiment of concern “for the other with whom we enact a world” which he contends is necessary for those imbued by Western scientific culture might not seem strange to Indigenous wisdom practitioners. The path the Eastern practitioner lays down as he begins to understand what his mind is doing, thereby losing some of the automaticity of his patterns may indeed be a very different path from the one proscribed in Indigenous places but the recognition that skills are inseparable from wisdom and that learning comes about through mindful, open-ended and transformative experiences might be shared understandings between the two wisdom traditions.
Chapter 3  
Laying down a Path while Walking

In this chapter, I will outline the theoretical framework for my action research study, using the early years of my teaching in Fort Simpson as a heuristic. The intent in this chapter is to describe the path laid down while walking that has been the thinking, teaching and inquiring into a place-conscious approach for teaching writing in the Northwest Territories.

Contemplating commingling waters

When I lived in Fort Simpson, I often walked along the river bank observing the occasional movement of townspeople in boats or tourists in float planes and canoes. But most often, what I observed was the movement of the two rivers that ran side by side: the Naechag’ah, and the Dehcho. Those rivers provided the metaphor that was central to my thinking about Indigenous and Western relationships in that place for they kept distinct identities even as they moved alongside each other. I often thought about the ways that the two rivers affected and influenced each other although I recognized the flaw in an organic metaphor that cannot take into consideration the power relations of human interactions. Indigenous people have no choice but to commingle with the waters of the dominant river while those from the dominant culture can choose to interact or to ignore the relationship. In this dissertation, as the idea of separateness and commingling wends its way through my writing, I will keep an awareness of mainstream norms and privileges glinting on the surface of the metaphor so as not to become too simplistic or sentimental about possibilities for a relationship that has been fraught for centuries. I also recognize that, at times, I viewed those rivers from an aesthetic position that would not have been possible for traditional Dene people for whom the river was life itself and never a testing ground for one’s own sensibilities (Bate, 2000) and never ‘nature’ perceived from pre-determined
aesthetic categories from the Arts and Humanities (Bate, 2000). When I walked the river bank to ponder the challenges of teaching in Fort Simpson, wondering about the powerful unseen currents that surged underneath and puzzling over the realization that my commitment to do a good job teaching, I was troubled by the fact that I knew so little about what was needed or how to go about being useful.

On my first day in town, however, I had blind faith in my ability corroborated by excellent teacher candidate evaluations from my B.Ed. practica and high marks in my education courses. I walked around the borders of the island, beginning at the causeway that connected the town to the mainland to orient myself to the place where I would be teaching. I tramped through willow and alder bush, and then past the wild raspberries canes that ringed the overflow campground, which had been established in anticipation of the Pope’s visit in the early 1980s. I stopped at the clearing at the snye, the narrow channel of still water, to admire a pair of mallard ducks before making my way through skinny, grey-root and branch-encumbered paths in the remaining patch of old growth black spruce forest, bordered to the east by the privately owned bush plane air strip. On I went through willows and soggy ground before coming out onto the rosy dirt road at the North end of the island. I walked on past one clapboard house and three shacks scattered in the trees to the northwest and the community boat launch to the northeast, until I reached the mud flats. I stood for a moment contemplating the two rivers that flowed alongside each other before I turned back south along the rocky and muddy shore of those rivers and climbed up the bank to walk along the rivers’ edge.

I had arrived in Fort Simpson in time to experience the warm days and chilly evenings of mid August which signaled the beginning of a Northern fall. Poplar, birch and aspen leaves were tinged at the edges with yellow; purple swallows darted in and out of their dusty, hard holes in the rivers’ clay brown banks. Once school began, I walked daily along the river bank reflecting upon
my teaching day. My training at a large, urban Canadian university in a concurrent program from 1983–1986 had taught me to be a ‘guide on the side,’ a facilitator of learning. In my English Language Arts Methods courses, I learned about process pedagogies and how to facilitate group work. In Educational Psychology courses, I learned how to give “I messages” and 101 ways to enhance self-confidence. In foundations courses, I learned that teachers were in teaching because teaching represented the familiar. I also learned that teachers were far too comfortable with the familiar.

Before I arrived in the community, I read Watkin’s (1977) book Dene Nation Colony Within, an abridgement of testimonies presented at the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Inquiry otherwise known as the Berger Inquiry. From this text, I believe I gained some understanding of the Dene ontology and epistemology that, at that point in history, pitted most Dene against the oil developers who wished to run a pipeline through Denendeh. I read Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed and intended to use it as the theoretical basis for my teaching. But once I began working in Fort Simpson, it was unclear to me as to how I would work with Freire’s ideas and, while the Watkin’s book provided a snapshot of views around the political context, it, too, only nominally helped me orient my teaching in the NWT. I was unsure how to navigate critical pedagogic theory in a context where I, as a non-Indigenous teacher, lived the tension that Haig Brown (1988) describes between being useful and being undesirable.

Over fourteen years of teaching in that community and five more in Yellowknife, I looked for working understandings that would allow me to act more appropriately in my Northern classrooms. As a schoolteacher it was possible to spend most of my days in the cultural bubble of school within the fishbowl of the Western educational system. My exposure to Dene teachings has been sporadic, coming as people saw fit in everyday conversations or in public speeches at community events. My understandings were supplemented by written texts that take a pan-
Indigenous perspective and also by literature written by Indigenous authors. I also turned to theories that might explain the worldview of my Indigenous students. I read a little theory from a variety of sources—taking what I could use (and find in the days before internet access) and leaving the rest behind. I read some of the literature that considers the disconnect between the Western teacher’s world and the world of his or her students as a clash between oral and written traditions; in particular, Ong’s (1982) *Orality and Literacy* comes to mind. Ong’s work inspired me to think of the importance of the oral texts of the classroom challenging the way I used discussion as exploration. Reading Scollon and Scollon (1995) on Dene discourse patterns also helped me to consider the way I privileged certain ways of talking over others and thereby encouraged me to deliberately include other patterns. I shared my newfound awareness with my students so that they could understand a little of the history of discourse usage in Western schools and determine their own response. The focus on orality inspired me to think of ways to thread drama and poetry through the coursework of English Language Arts such that I no longer planned stand-alone drama and poetry units. However, Ong and Scollon and Scollon did not provide the answers to all of the perplexing events in the classroom and I began to think about the ways that orality and written traditions influence one another even if Ong argued that the two constituted and were constituted by very different realities.

**Understandings derived from places**

Outside of the sporadic study I undertook, I brought with me my own understandings that were formed in very specific locations. I was in my early twenties when I arrived in Fort Simpson from the small community in ‘cottage country’ two-and-half hours northeast of Toronto where I grew up. Old timers from that place said that the deciduous forests of my childhood had replaced old growth forests I had never seen and could not imagine. As a young man, my father had
worked in the saw mill that was now falling to ruin on our local river. My grandmother’s marina was on the biggest lake in the area, but she owned a country store on the road to the lake by the time I was old enough to help out by pumping gas and serving ice cream to cottagers. Those cottagers often told me how fortunate I was to live in place that was still “close to nature,” but that was not always how I felt. At 19, I moved to Toronto to escape the smallness of my rural upbringing and to study for an undergraduate degree in French and English and a concurrent Bachelor of Education.

I moved to the Northwest Territories after one year of teaching French-as-a-Second Language to elementary students in a community only 45 minutes away from where I grew up. I didn’t like teaching when students were not fluent enough to carry on a conversation or write more than the most rudimentary sentences. How would I ever know what any of my students thought? I was rooming at the time with a French-as-a-Second-Language teacher who had taught for six years in the Northwest Territories before returning to the South. She kept telling me that I should go north while I kept insisting that I would go to Africa or Central America after I’d paid off my student loans. I relented when I realized that going North would allow me to pay off those student loans and “get to know Indigenous people in my own country before heading off to someone else’s.” I accepted a job in Fort Simpson to teach English Language Arts to Grades 9 and 10 (the school had just added Grade 10), Visual Arts to Grades 7–9 (there hadn’t been an Art teacher in years), French-as-a-Second Language to Grades 5–10 in multi-age groupings (most of the children were in the Dene language class but there was a political push to offer French), and Home Economics (to the girls while the boys took shop.)
Cultural identity and economic prospects in Northern educational policies

Before I left Ontario to teach in the Northwest Territories, I received a slim, Northern educational policy document in the mail. *Education in the NWT* (Northwest Territories Education, 1982) called for “an expanded vision of the school system”—“one which reinforces the child’s cultural identity and builds on the experiences each student brings to the classroom” (p. 1). I was excited by the prospect of following the guiding principles for Northern education which were profoundly responsive to place—directing educational activity that respects the cultural background, language and learning styles of the children, linking learning experiences to the community and allowing students to develop thinking, problem-solving and communication skills so they could make sound decisions for themselves and their community. As well, I looked forward to all that I would learn.

As the document was already five years old, I naively expected its philosophy and guiding principles for education to be manifest in the school where I would be working; this was not the case. I also thought that someone would show me or at least tell me what to do and, while I did encounter a good many people who had ideas, even with all of the contradictions aside, these ideas only glossed the surface of what was needed to balance a pedagogy that was deeply and firmly rooted in the traditions of elsewhere.

The land, the land, the land, the land

The Northwest Territories currently comprises 33 communities inhabited by 42,000 people organized territorially in 8 regions. In those communities, there are 49 schools with roughly 800 teachers and about 8,450 students (NWT Teacher’s Association and the GNWT Department of Education, Culture and Employment, 2011). In 1987, when I went North, the Northwest Territories included Nunavut and comprised more than a quarter of the total land mass...
of Canada, but unbeknownst to me and perhaps to most Southern Canadians at that time, for many years the Inuit had been seeking official recognition for the territory they had lived in and managed since the beginning of storied time. In 1987, the majority of the people living in the NWT were Indigenous but after division in 1999, only Nunavut in the east maintained that majority. The NWT in the west had three large communities (of which Yellowknife was the largest) where the majority of the population were non-Dene; the larger center’s populations tipped the balance making just a little over half of the population of the NWT, non-Dene. Fort Simpson, an eight-hour drive to the south and west of Yellowknife was the largest community and regional center in the Dehcho region. This region has 9 schools in 8 communities and serves 628 students (NWTTA and GNWT, 2011).

Dene political and cultural leaders, elders, community members who spoke at public meetings and the Dene teachers (there were only 2 at our school of 16 teachers), were always talking about the land. In any address, on any given topic at some point someone would make reference to the land. Because of the frequency, insistence and reverence with which the word was spoken, I came to feel that what was being addressed here that was outside of my understanding. I had not given much thought to what the word “land” might mean to me; like so many of us, I use words without much thought to the way these words are constituted by other people’s intentions. Bakhtin’s concept of “heteroglossia” (1981) allows us to consider how the speech practices of any given culture in a given place and period include the idioms of different ethnicities, genders, and generations and these idioms compete for ascendance. Additionally, “heteroglossia” embraces a conception of the social, historical and geographical conditions that inflect possible meanings.

It's hard to say how I might first have understood what Dene people were talking about in the late ’80s. I might have hearkened back to high school Geography and thought about
topography and cartography. I might have thought about Biology class where land was the difference between a terrestrial ecosystem and an aquatic ecosystem. The land might also have been the territory that was fought over in all the wars with all the dates of History class. It might have been the sense of place that inspired the Romantics or the setting of the class novel in English class. In Civics class, the land was the backdrop for the human drama of politics and every morning “the land” was “our home and Native land”—as the anthem of the territory now known as Canada played on the school’s public address system.

When I think about what “the land” might mean now I wonder how the conception of the human mind might extend beyond the biological being and beyond the interpersonal social world to include the more-than-human world and I try to entertain the possibilities. But in humility, I often see myself like the pioneer in Margaret Atwood’s (1975) poem “Progressive Insanities of a Pioneer” which begins:

He stood, a point
on a sheet of green paper
proclaiming himself the centre

In Atwood’s poem, the pioneer lives in Donald’s (2001) conception of the literate world. His point is not a node of energy in the vast web that is the cosmos; rather he is the center in his allotment of land over which he is determined to assert his superiority by “imposing” and asserting himself in a futile attempt to maintain his fixed sense of self. “I am not random,” he declares. The land responds in “words he [can’t] understand.” Through his physical efforts he manages to construct a house but remains a “mind/ inside, in the middle of nowhere” fearing the chaos of the more-than-human world that threatens his ordered existence and his rational mind. “Everything/is getting in.”
Everything is in me and I am in everything but I don’t live this any more than Atwood’s crazy pioneer who absolutely refuses to recognize. For me and that pioneer, the more-than-human world is out there—the ultimate other occupying space. When I do enter into relationship with the more-than-human world, it is like the dialogue of a whole class discussion that goes from the teacher to Student A back to the teacher to Student D back to the teacher and so on. I am always the centre.

While many humans do not generally spend a great deal of time thinking of their experience in terms of their relation to place, I believe that the Inuvialuit of Inuvialuit territory, the Dene and Métis of Denendeh, and the Inuit of Nunavut are quite conscious of it. In Fort Simpson, I suspected that while some of the younger people lived this awareness they also thought about their place in terms of its relation to other places—virtual, imagined and experienced in actuality. For the most part, their understanding of other places came from the media, from the books we examined in class, from people’s accounts of living “down South” and from the occasional trip to Edmonton, a 17-hour drive to the South. Some of the young people I taught in Fort Simpson were from “down South” while others with parents from down South had grown up in Fort Simpson. The embodied minds of the young people included varying degrees of connections to other places. Given that the very structure of the mind is tied to locality and spaces (Malpas, 1999), I often wondered what generations of experiences on the land might mean for the minds of my Dene and Métis students despite the far-reaching and violent changes in recent history that led to the contemporary reality of life in a pretty, little, fiber-optic wired, land-accessible, subarctic community of displaced, resilient people at the confluence of two great rivers.
A philosophical topography for Northern places

Place, as Casey (1993, 1997) points out, can be “appreciated in terms of its inherent inclusiveness” (p. 335) and it is this inclusivity in a theoretical framework that I required for my research with teachers who lived in communities across the NWT. What Malpas (1999) argues in *Place and experience: a philosophical topography*, the text that is central to my understanding of place, allows for a framework capable of holding contradictory and conflicting understandings and can engender a language that might seem plausible to the people of Denendeh if ever anyone desired to read my work. Malpas’s conceptualization of place provides a way out of the theoretical predicament of postmodernism that problematizes notions of collective identity. While the work of cultural geographers reminds us that spending one’s whole life in one locality does not result in a stable identity for everyone, as one does not necessarily follow all the same trails as one’s neighbor (Reynolds, 2004), nevertheless, some notion of collective identity is imperative for my work. Perhaps a concern about one-to-one correspondence between place and identity comes from a construal of place as locality and, furthermore, from a perception that the nature of this locality is static. Just as the natural world “won’t stand still” (Massey, 2005 p.131), the conceptualization of place that I propose is dynamic and changing. I wish to respect Dene perspectives and stories about where is here. As Womack (2008) puts it, academia’s penchant for postmodernism means that “just when minorities are insisting on telling their own histories, it would seem, they find that history is fiction” (p. 353). Some notion, however fluid and evolving, of a collective identity and shared past is crucial for the constitutional claims of Indigenous people who rely on notions of distinct societies and on inherent rights that rise out of place, predating the British Crown, and also include imaginary sovereignty (Womack, 2008) arising from stories that are emplaced. Land claims are not separate from the everyday, lived experience.
of the Dene, Métis, and the Inuvialuit, and I could not ethically work with a theoretical framework that discounted this claim.

For the Dene, the land, which comprises all that is more-than-human, exists outside of the stories that are told about this animated, living possibility for processes, at the same time that the land exists in and through spiritual and practical relationships with the people who tell those stories. For the Dene, as for Malpas, place is a complex but unitary structure that encompasses. I believe that many of the Dene are bound to place and this binding is derived from the very nature of human thought, experience and identity as established in and through place.

From my understanding of traditional Dene worldviews, I suggest that Malpas’s (1999) ontological orientation toward place fits the locations where my research took place. For Malpas, place “possesses a complex and differentiated structure made up of a set of interconnected and interdependent components – subject and object, space and time, self and other” (p. 173). For Casey (1997) and also for critical geographers such as Massey (2005), space must be conceived of as a dynamic entity—not a fixed backdrop for social action. Imagining change requires imaging new spaces, which is ultimately what I hope writing practices that are responsive to places in the Northwest Territories might allow.

The central problem of conceptualizing place, according to Malpas (1999), is not a question of marginalizing or forgetting place but rather has to do with “the very opacity of the notion itself” (p. 19). Furthermore, “the structure of place is complicated by its character as containing and contained, as open but bounded, as folded inwards and outwards, as both concretely experienced and abstractly represented” (p. 173). Inevitably, place can be grasped and understood in a multiplicity of ways. Place may be understood by focusing on the concrete features of a natural landscape or by emphasizing specific social or cultural features or by treating place purely as experienced. Malpas contends that much of the exploration of place in the
literature, takes up place and particular places through only one mode of representation (the literature on writing theory and pedagogy that draws from conceptualizations of place attests to this), but just as the diversity in ways of grasping place suggest the complexity of place, no writing about place should try to ignore that complexity.

Malpas argues that, in the literature, place is often defined in simple terms as physical location or at other times refers to a narrower concept of space. Some writers, such as Casey, seek to distinguish place from space. For Malpas, space is the dimension that “allows the simultaneous presentation, the ‘co-presence’ of distinct elements” (p.105). Massey writes about the lack of clarity that writers bring to uses of space, spatial images and metaphors and Malpas suggests that Massey’s arguments could also be attributed to what writers do to the concept of place. Basso (1996), who worked with the Western Apache of Cibecue, Arizona, for whom places are potentially instructive, asserts that place is often dealt with as an ancillary phenomenon in ethnography. I intermingle Indigenous understandings of place with the understandings of Malpas’s and others from the Western tradition in an effort to conceptualize place in a manner responsive to the locations where the teachers in my study lived. I hope the reader will bear in mind the tension in understandings that exists between those places and the places from which I write.

Even within the conceptualization of place as location, location can be understood as points on the grid or as locality, which implies a certain dimensionality, a certain space. Whatever the case, Malpas argues, place cannot be separated from notions of extension and spatiality. Place is both open and bounded. A place in which one can dwell gives space to the possibility of dwelling, while a place where one can dwell has to be more than a space. Space is often taken to be the atemporal physical extension of volume, size, shape, length, height, width, distance, and position as those notions apply to physical objects. Space also has non-physical meaning as it can
be taken to mean room or extension as well as interval or dimension and so can be used to mean
temporal duration. Malpas does not believe that place should be separated from its notions of
dimensionality or extension or locality or enironing situation. The concept of place must take all
into consideration and more.

Malpas argues that place has been dropped from Western philosophy in favor of a focus
on space, which has been narrowly understood throughout Western thought as “a pure realm of
containment” (p. 26). Philosophers from Descartes to Alexander and Whitehead have made space
important in their philosophy while place has figured in the philosophies of only a few such as
Casey, Malpas, Massey, Soja and Tuan. Casey (1997) points to the way that three centuries of
discourses has focused on Time and Space, so that the end result is that place has been considered
as derivative of spatiality. Just as space has become viewed as physical extension, place has
become viewed as location within a larger spatial structure. Malpas contrasts this view to the
humanized and humanizing view of place in Wordsworth’s poetry or even to place in Heidegger
or Merleau-Ponty. Since space and place are closely related terms, and since as Malpas has
shown, understanding spatiality as primarily tied to physical extension is an obstacle to
understanding place as a physically significant concept, arriving at an adequate account of place
requires a rethinking of space.

One way that people try to treat place as more than spatial location is to consider it as an
essentially subjective or psychological phenomenon, such as in the work of Dillard (1974), Lopez
(1986), and Schama (1995). The difficulty with this practice, according to Malpas, is that it
merely conjoins the physical space with human response and treats place as derivative of these
ideas. Moreover, this means that this concept could be completely contingent and have little to do
with specific topographic qualities that are at issue with the experience of place. Malpas, like
Casey (1993, 1997), draws on Heidegger who distinguishes the ‘being in’ that is proper to human
being-in-the-world as opposed to the ‘being in’ that is associated with the physical containment that is part of the modern conception of space. For Malpas, “the crucial point about the connection between place and experience is not, however, that place is properly something only encountered ‘in’ experience, but rather that place is integral to the very structure and possibility of experience” (p. 32, his italics). Malpas’s view of subjectivity is tied to notions of agency and embodied spatiality and is constituted in relation to his conception of place, which includes objects (not objects understood as inert things, Massey, 2005), events, and persons. To this I would insert Abram’s thinking (1997) so that ‘objects’ includes trees and mountains, bogs and rivers, winds and weather in what Abram’s calls “the more-than-human world.” Some Indigenous people see themselves as belonging to the land, as people who know and recognize the land just as the land knows and recognizes them, in a relationship that is both spiritual and practical (Cajete, 1994; Akiwenzie-Damm, 1998; King, 1990). Colonizers imported and created a new primarily economic relationship—on the land rather than with the land (Deloria, 1999).

Place is the frame in which objectivity, subjectivity and intersubjectivity must be located. For Malpas, place encompasses the social institutions and activities that are expressed in and through the structure of a place, but place is not merely a social construct because the social does not exist prior to place. Although Basso explores people’s attachments to place that stem from their culture and shared bodies of local knowledge out of which people and their communities imbue places with meaning, he adds that place is not only an attachment but also a reciprocated relationship of care. According to Basso (1996), “Apache constructions of place reach deeply into other cultural spheres, including conceptions of wisdom, notions of morality, politeness and tact in forms of spoken discourse, and certain conventional ways of imagining and interpreting the Apache tribal past” (p. xv). Basso, like Malpas, borrows from Heidegger the idea that one must pay attention to the forms of consciousness with which individuals apprehend geographic...
space—in all of its many layers of lived relationships. For Malpas, the possibility for the social arises within the structure of place—an interconnected region within which people, objects and even one’s self can appear to be recognized, identified and interacted with.

I believe that Malpas’ conceptualization of place is closer to Indigenous understandings than other Western conceptualizations, in that he sees the elements of the relational structure of place—spatiality and temporality, subjectivity and objectivity, self and other—and purports the role of place in the formation of self. There are some profound differences, but also some areas for an overlapping of understandings, such that his conceptualization of place could work as a theoretical framework for research in Indigenous places.

In Indigenous terms, the world is often understood as flows of energies across a permeable boundary between manifest and unmanifest realities (Gunn Allen, 1986; Deloria, 2000, Herman, 2008). Cajete (1994) emphasizes Indigenous people’s give-and-take relationship with the natural world, which presupposes a responsibility to care for, sustain, and respect other living entities. The world is not a meaningless container for human life (Herman, 2008, p.75) and is therefore not to be treated carelessly. Similarly, Deloria (1994) wrote of “the realization that the world, and all its possible experiences, constituted a social reality, a fabric of life in which everything had the possibility of intimate knowing relationships because, ultimately, everything was related. This world was a unified world” (p. 14). These understandings are not unlike the ones I came across during my years in the North, where it was also understood that humanity is not the sole consciousness on the planet and the human and natural world are not divided into neat
categories. Herman (2008) defines *wisdom* as decision-making based on deep and abiding knowledge and understanding of long-term processes aimed at maintaining balance and harmony in the world in the present and the future. He sees this embodied in the Haudenosaunee philosophy that all major decisions of a nation must be based on a mindfulness of seven generations.

One of the essential differences between Malpas’s and Indigenous perspectives is his privileging of rationality. Herman (2008) reminds us that modern geography rests upon “the edifice of rationality”—a foundation whose construction began after the Reformation, came together in the Enlightenment and was fortified through the work of Descartes and Darwin and through the influences of capitalism, leading to what Max Weber called the “disenchantment of the world.” What this disenchantment entailed was the removal of the “spiritual” aspect of the world in a world that was reduced to a mechanistic materiality—materiality which allows, for example, the extracting of “resources” in the Northwest Territories. Deloria (1999) reminds us that if one substitutes “energy” for “spirit” in many Indigenous texts, Indigenous spirituality is close to a modern theory of energy/matter. When the world is rendered in mechanistic terms, it loses any intrinsic values—values come to exist in the mind, not the world—and the division provides a conceptual distance and detachment from the world that allows for the commodification of the material world (Herman, 2008). Womack (2008) provides additional insights: “spiritual reality is mediated through human social practice, but that does not mean spirits do not exist apart from human” (p. 364). The objective world that
Malpas describes was once an animated world for many people and for some Indigenous people, it still is.

Continuing with Malpas’s conceptualization of spatiality, space cannot be derived from objective space as though it were some narrow portion of objective space. Objectivity lacks any notion of perspective, so therefore lacks what is essential to the notion of subjective space. Objective spatiality is not the capacity for abstraction, but the intuition of a homogenous medium that is required in order to conceive of a plurality of subjective spaces that can be located in respect to one another. When one realizes that there is a view of space that may differ from one person to another just as capacities and locations differ, one possesses a grasp of objective space and thereby the means in which subjective space can be plotted.

The idea of subjective space is tied to the idea of an experiencing creature that must have a grasp of its own self-identity. For Malpas, this grasp of one’s self-identity comes through the unity of mental states (by which he means beliefs, desires, hopes, fears, etc.). He contests the view that the unity of mental states is grounded in the unity of an underlying self, one that would require us to consider mental states as distinct from the experiencing, thinking subject to whom they belong. Nor can he accept arguments furthered by people like Dennet that mental unity is grounded in some sub-personal mechanism within the brain. Mental events are identical with physical events but mental events cannot be reduced to physical events; the physical causes cannot provide a rational ground for those states, nor shed light on connections. Self-identity is tied to the integration of states, which present themselves to us in a holistic manner. An individual can be mistaken in his or her beliefs, but the ‘mine-ness’ that accompanies thoughts and experiences “simply reflects the way in which thoughts and experiences are always combined within a network of other such thoughts and experiences” (p. 90). The holistic ways in which mental phenomena present themselves is analogous to the holistic presentation of external
phenomena that leads to what Gunn Allen identifies as Indigenous precepts of a whole and unified universe (1986).

Mental states are themselves organized and their content determined through their embeddedness in a larger system of such states. For example, memories do not have significance independent of the wider context in which they fit. The ongoing narrative construction and reconstruction of one’s life, which is not immune from error or omission, is part of a larger attempt to grasp a life as a whole. Beliefs, actions, desires and hopes have the content that they do only because the parts of a life are fit together to be grasped as having some unity and consistency. There are inconsistencies, certainly, but they can arise in relation to other states and events and since one’s mental life is spread out over time and one cannot grasp all of one’s thoughts all at once, one lives with inconsistencies by means of narrative and story told to achieve an interconnected life.

Just as a grasp of subjectivity requires a grasp of spatiality, so too does a grasp of other persons. An external world distinct from the subject is the common property of all conscious beings. For Levinas, Malpas says, the experience of the other is an experience with what lies outside of me within the realm of the spatial. His exteriority is his truth. The connection between the experience of the subjectivity of others and spatiality comes about because of the need to locate the other outside of oneself (similar to the connection that occurs between spatiality and the existence of objects) and also because the idea of subjectivity is tied to the notion of located, embodied agency, so any subject—one self or another—must be grasped as spatially located and embodied.

Other-subjectivity is dependent upon the concept of objectivity and some concept of subjectivity. Is the concept of other-subjectivity secondary to the grasp of subjectivity of oneself? This then, would suggest that the problem of other minds is primarily a problem of empathy or
simulation, which Malpas says would make the contrast between self and world primary, and the contrast between self and other secondary. Thompson (2001), in “Empathy and Consciousness,” says: “In general, one’s experience of space and one’s sense of self-identity are tied together; we perceive things to be arrayed around us, while we are ‘here,’ at the centre or ‘zero-point’ of our orientation in space” (p. 18). Bakhtin (1981) eschewed any such notion of understanding that would be gained by losing one’s place. For him, in the polyphony of human communication, the best we can expect is to be close to the other; we put ourselves in another’s place. Thompson posits that one feature of empathy is our ability to recognize the other as another centre of orientation in the world and that we come to this awareness through an understanding of bodily space: she is ‘there’ in relation to my ‘here.’ Bakhtin, saw potential in Einstein’s conception of a complex unity of differences and from this surmised that all meaning is relational, the consequence of a dialogue between and among bodies in motion whether these bodies are physical, political or conceptual (Holquist, 1990, p. 20-21).

Malpas says that subjectivity, the view from one’s perspective, rules out simultaneous access to another perspective:

The complete lack of direct experiential access to any perspective other than one’s own—is not metaphysically mysterious (it derives from nothing more than the fact that I cannot be in more than one location at a time), but it does provide a way of explaining, at least in part, why it is that the contrast between self and other may be regarded as an encounter with what is completely ‘other’—with that which is completely alien—a point given special emphasis by writers such as Levinas. (p. 142)

For Malpas, the grasp of self and other are interdependent and irreducible. Grasping the existence of the other is a matter of locating the other in relation to ourselves and to the objects we encounter in the world.
During the research study, at the last workshop held in Yellowknife in April, 2010, the three participants who were most involved with the project—Laurence, Margaret, Eric—and I wound up speaking extensively about the importance of empathy in teaching and learning. The teachers spoke briefly about the political implication of being non-Indigenous teachers in the Northwest Territories. I brought this subject up for discussion because of the relative absence of the political dimension of place in the workshop conversations. I mentioned that I thought the political dimension was largely absent from teacher discourse I had heard over the years in the NWT and wondered whether, in deference to notions of ‘harmony,’ we teachers are prone to avoiding topics that might generate conflict. The conversation turned on the question of residential school settlements and the anger Laurence felt those settlements engendered in some of his non-Indigenous students to the question of how we move students from self-interest to other-interest. Laurence paraphrased a presentation he had once read by Margaret Laurence that had had an impact on him. He said that it was about “what she would say in her final hour. Essentially she says,” Laurence said, “I don’t have anything philosophical to tell you. I don’t have The Answer by any means but the most important thing is in your heart’s core to feel the reality of others. That’s the most important thing.”

The teachers spoke about the various ways they tried to help students feel that “reality of others” through literature. Laurence gave the example of “Orwell shooting an elephant” and said that Orwell related his experience of being “not a very happy imperialist in India” and moving from that vicarious experience of place to the place where the students live to help them make connections. Laurence’s comments made me think of the way I used literature from South Africa to bring that issue of apartheid to my students’ attention but also so they could make connections to their own experience. There seemed to be something safe about starting out from a continent so far away and using that place to broach our own issues. Laurence had asked his students to read
The Kite Runner by Khaled Hosseini (2003), the story of Amir, an affluent boy from Afghanistan and his friend Hassan who is also the son of his father’s Hazaran servant. Margaret had used a number of different books in her classes in literature circles and specifically mentioned the impact of Elizabeth Laird’s book about “boys growing up in Palestine, of their daily life of living under curfew and Israeli tanks blasting.” It was her intent to offer students “books that look at what most of us would think of as intolerable situations for children.” Eric felt that the teachers in his school did not avoid difficult political situations. He said: “I would start with context and provide the history for what we were discussing,” but with a shrug he indicated that he didn’t think any topics were off limits.

The teachers specified that just the study alone of texts such as The Kite Runner, a novel about the ethical obligations that emerge out of relations in places, did not automatically mean students developed empathy. They speculated whether empathy was developmental and suspected that some students had had more exposure than others through the prompting of their parents. Laurence mentioned that as a long-time hockey coach he had noted that some of the parents he encountered, while they clearly had empathy for their own children seemed to have difficulty caring about other people’s children. He also mentioned an experience after he showed students the film Osama about “the plight of women in Afghanistan.” From his perspective, the sobbing of the protagonist who is captured by the Taliban and becomes the spouse for “this 65-80-year-old man” was “very, very powerful,” but he said that one of his students commented: “Her crying really annoyed me.” Laurence laughed, and we all did, and I responded to the boy’s comment with: “Yah, I’ll bet it did.” Laurence went on to say that the boy played on a hockey team and had “no tolerance at all” for the girls who played on the team. Laurence added: “You are presenting these movies—just very, very powerful to make a point and they get the opposite from it.” He acknowledged that empathy requires a degree of maturity (among other issues of
embracing difference that were discussed at various points in the conversation) continuing with “and you wonder, ‘Am I ever going to reach that kid?’” Even as he acknowledged that it “isn’t always fair to ask our students to put themselves in the positions of people who have suffered so much injustice.”

The teachers conceded that high school students were at various points in their abilities to “feel the reality of others.” Margaret suggested that she thought confidence was an issue and connected her belief to their writing, where she felt “they avoided putting their own voice in” it. Laurence had mentioned that he thought writing practices were essential to the capacity to develop empathy. Margaret went on to add that with so much “nonpersonal writing” and so many responses to literature that don’t go beyond “I liked this part” or “I didn’t like this part” it is hard to develop empathy through response to literature practices alone. The other teachers felt that students’ lack of experience with texts was also a factor; those who struggled with their reading were less likely to explore the possibilities for empathy. It may well be that just as too much concentrated effort on decoding text can impede comprehension for younger children, too much concentrated effort on comprehension may impede mindful exploration of the issues. In other conversations, the teachers spoke about the possibility for teacher read-alouds to expose students to ideas and forms that they might not always be able to broach on their own.

When the conversation turned to whether teachers need to have empathy, the answer was unequivocally “Yes!” Margaret said teachers need empathy for both the content and for their students in order to figure out what is going on when the students encounter difficulty. Laurence said, “It’s not a question of whether we have to have it. It’s a question of whether or not it’s the most important quality.” But then the conversation turned to the way many teachers (localities other than the NWT were also mentioned) may feel there is little empathy for them. Teachers who, for example, feel “they are not supported” or looked upon by the community as “people
who have a pile of holidays” lose their energy for the job. Laurence, who has 32 years of experience, said: “We have to have as much energy as our kids, and that comes from liking what we are doing, trying to move ahead, trying to learn more…but the most important quality is empathy—caring for [our students.]”

**Living ethical know-how rather than ethical know-what**

Varela’s (1992) thinking in *Ethical Know-How* could guide teachers to consider how empathy might translate into ways of being in the classroom that emerge from understandings closer to wisdom traditions than reason traditions. For Varela, a wise person is “one who knows what is good and spontaneously does it” (p. 4). I believe this definition corresponds to the “human being” (Blood, 2009) in Indigenous thinking systems. The wise person or human being does not act on prescriptive principles (although these principles are available for the initiate in both Eastern and Indigenous traditions) but rather pursues an active and engaged ethics based on a tradition that identifies what it is “good to be” rather than what it is “good to do” (Taylor, 1989). For Varela, and, I add, for practitioners of Indigenous wisdom traditions, what counts is the way one responds in everyday life. The “immediate coping” (Varela, p. 5) with a situation that requires an ethical response is opposed to situations that are experienced by a central “I” who is performing deliberate, willed action.

Varela argues that too much attention in Western scholarship has been given to the aspect of ethical behavior that is grounded in judgments and justifications creating an abstract tradition. For Varela, the proper units of knowledge are primarily concrete and incorporated, in contrast to the knowledge units of the “know-what” Western tradition which are “general,” “formal,” “logical,” “well-defined,” “represented” and “foreseen” (p. 6). Varela extends his conception of enacted cognition to behaviors initiated in response to the needs of others, arguing that the lived,
concrete, embodied experience is where one should look to consider ethical responses as they are lived in the immediacy of a given situation. Varela claims that people have a “readiness-for-action” (p. 9) appropriate for every specific lived situation—what he calls a microworld. “Who we are” at any given moment, he says, “cannot be divorced from what other things and who other people are to us” (p. 10). Given that microworlds are historically constituted, action is “a matter of the commonsensical emergence of an appropriate stance from the entire history of the agent’s life” (p. 11).

The individual is understood to exist within an ethical living system. Respect for the autonomy of the individual means recognizing that he or she will find his or her way to the next moment by acting appropriately out of his or her own resources. Ethical responses emerge with appropriate developmental conditions. Varela suggests that Mencius, an early Confucian, provides necessary examples of appropriate developmental conditions. Mencius identified the importance of ‘extension’—that is, the ability to extend from situations in which a particular action is considered correct to analogous situations in which appropriate action is unclear. Underlying the ability to extend is ‘attention,’ which is the capacity of mind that allows the identification of correspondences and affinities and also ‘intelligent awareness,’ which guides action “in harmony with the texture of the situation at hand, not in accordance with a set of rules or procedures” (p. 31). Varela contends that Mencius’s view of ethical expertise is very close to the teaching of Taoism and Buddhism in that ethical behavior is approached progressively and pragmatically. I suggest that the ethics of Indigenous teachings are also approached in this manner and also point to the development of a disposition in “human beings” where immediacy precedes deliberation and exists without the distinction between subject and object. Although not expressed in the same concepts and metaphors, Indigenous teachings, in their privileging of the relational nature of human existence, point to the emptying of the self that Varela maintains is an
emptying in to an all-encompassing, de-centered responsivity, which leads to compassion in Eastern traditions and to right relations in Indigenous traditions.

**Ethical know-how for teaching**

Varela’s call for ethical know-how has implications for classroom teaching. Like Fowler (2006), in her text a *Curriculum of Difficulty*, I think of the teacher’s ways of being in the classroom through Heidegger’s three ‘modes of engagement’: “ready-to-hand, unready-to-hand, and present at hand” (2006, p. 124.) The everyday mode of engagement in the classroom, the one in which the teacher makes many decisions and responses in split seconds, is ‘ready-to-hand.’ The teacher’s skills at this mode are not so much carefully thought-through as responsive. When expectations and familiar patterns break-down, teachers experience the un-ready-to-hand and must work to understand the situation that they experience as having gone wrong. The present-at-hand mode is the thoughtful mode arrived at when teachers deliberately detach themselves from practical involvement from the shared projects of the classroom. In this mode, teachers are prompted to interrupt familiar patterns and assumptions.

In the ‘ready-to-hand’ mode of engagement, the teacher’s thinking is connected and responsive as s/he operates out of a habitual repertoire of possibilities, thereby experiencing herself as embodied in the teaching element. Complexity thinking, which will be taken up in the next section, offers us an extended description of this everyday mode and begins to offer the education community the language to name aspects of praxis that have hitherto been defined perhaps as “the art” of teaching and left to the individual imagination to determine what that might mean. Like Fowler, complexivist educationalists contend that much of the lived experience of teaching falls into a mode of being that requires skills and abilities so practiced and familiar as to need little conscious reflection. One can see that Varela’s call for an ethical, common-sense
response to situations cannot occur until teachers make the practised and familiar conscious.

Place-conscious writing practices can play a role in bringing this about.

**Complexity thinking: Theoretical possibilities for praxis**

For Malpas (1999), place “possesses a complex and differentiated structure” (p. 173) that is conducive to the conceptualization of pedagogy that I am bringing to this dissertation. The experienced teachers in the *Northernvoices* study worked with a recognition of the complex nature of the places where they taught. In Barbara Daley’s (1999) study that examined the different learning processes undertaken by novice and expert professionals, the two differed in that the novices were just beginning to form and assimilate concepts while the experts actively integrated concepts through self-initiated strategies. Expert learners have an “intuitive” sense of the situation and are able to focus on the region where difficulty occurs without considering a large range of unfruitful possibilities. Experts move from abstract principles to a concrete understanding of these principles in experience, from seeing situations as discreet and unrelated to seeing situations as parts of a whole. The expert sees him or herself as “an involved performer” (p.135) rather than “a detached observer.”

Many of the teachers in the action research study worked intuitively with the language of complexity thinking. According to characteristics set out in her article, Daley would categorize the teachers who participated most frequently in the study as “experts.” Two of the other eight participants would also be experts while three would be “advanced novices” since they were still new enough in their teaching that their repertoire had not become readily available and familiar. When I was beginning to teach in the late ’80s, I was not aware of theoretical language that might help me describe my involvement in the complex dynamic of teaching; presumably, that reality was so unique and idiosyncratic as to defy description. However, complexity thinking created the
opportunity to begin to name the theorizing that many teachers intuit in the exigencies of their work.

Complexity thinking draws from physics, biology, chemistry, cybernetics, information science, and systems theory, and has made its way into the social sciences. According to Davis and Sumara (2006), complexity thinking is a theory that can be considered as a field of study, a philosophy, or a pragmatic approach that assumes a complex world. In this dissertation, I am working with the last definition: complexity thinking is “a way of thinking and acting” (p. 18). While most of the contributions of complexity thinking have been descriptive rather than pragmatic, Davis and Sumara contend that complexity thinking has evolved into a pragmatics of transformation—that is, a framework that offers explicit advice on how to work with, occasion and affect complex unities (p. 130). They argue that when learning ceases to be construed as a modification in behavior then experiences come to be seen as triggering rather than causing learning and the possibilities for complexity thinking in education become evident.

Complexity thinking is not a coherent, unified field but rather an umbrella term for the type of study that considers self-organizing, adaptive phenomena. When I heard my sixteen-year-old nephew ask his mother whether she had ever noticed the way pigeons may all be sitting quietly on a wire for some time and then they all get up at once and fly away, I said that I needed to talk to her boy about inquiries into emergent phenomena. Although my nephew may have been less interested in complexity thinking in educational communities, his aunt likes to think about the way that teachers make sense of the complex dynamics within classrooms, particularly the quality that her nephew observed in the pigeon’s behavior called emergence or self-organization, whereby agents that do not have to have much in common can join as a collective that seems to have a clear purpose. I am interested in thinking of the way that educational norms and conventions evolve and the possibilities whereby teachers can expand the space of what can occur
in their classes by establishing conditions for the emergence of “the as-yet unimagined” (p. 135) rather than simply perpetuating long-established ways of doing things. Complexity thinking is more about fostering the conditions for emergent understandings than prescribing structures that will make learning happen in easily interpretable ways.

In order to see how this might be possible, it is important to understand that complex systems are learning systems where learning is determined by the system and not by the event or set of experiences that prompt the learning. Learning events in complexity thinking cannot be described in terms of mechanical interactions because learning systems are not made up of particles or even individual learners, for that matter; they are comprised of other systems that learn. Complex systems, according to Davis, Sumara, and Luce-Kapler (2008) are “spontaneous, unpredictable, irreducible, contextual, and vibrantly sufficient—in brief, they are adaptive.” (p. 77). Learning cannot be caused; the way that a complex learning systems responds/adapts to new circumstances is dependent upon its embodied history. Learning systems are self-organizing, self-maintaining and self-determining.

Although many phenomena seem stable, complexity thinking recognizes that this perceived stability is due to the differences of evolutionary pace between the levels within the nested aspects implicated in the lived dynamic of teaching. Some of the constraints from other levels, such as imposed standardized evaluations and perceived pressures to cover a broad curriculum in a short amount of time, impede classroom autonomy such that teachers may think their only possibility for classroom organizational structure is the centralized network with the students at the end of the hub. Comments from this study’s teachers about the nature of the activities in their classrooms led me to believe that this was not the most dominant organizational structure. Many teachers included or emphasized a distributed network that is conducive with the student-centered approaches that seemed to be the theoretical underpinnings of their practices.
Complexity thinking offers a less efficient but more robust organizational structure: a decentralized network that privileges learning over the teacher or the student as the center of all activities. In this organizational structure, agents have opportunities to specialize for mutual effect.

As an example of what a decentralized network that privileges learning might look like, I offer this extensive example taken from a Writing-to-Learn course that my supervisor, Rebecca Luce-Kapler, offered for teacher candidates at Queen’s University in 2008. I had offered my high school students a similar opportunity to explore genres and forms in writing, but I think Luce-Kapler’s use of the magazine article as a prompt made her assignment better than mine. Students in a junior/intermediate or senior English class may be given the opportunity to explore how the information, ideas, phrasing and tone of a one-page magazine article alters when these elements are reproduced in different genres and forms. The teacher selects the magazine article, creates a series of explanations of various genres and forms on recipe cards and finds an example of those genres and forms to accompany the recipe cards. The magazine article is distributed to the whole class and students are instructed to read the article once to get an overall sense of it and then read it a second time to highlight the main points. (For other purposes, students might be instructed to focus on something other than main points—images and metaphors, for example). Students work in a group to create a poem, snapshot story, persuasive essay, TV. script, PowerPoint, Facebook page—any forms the teacher deems would provide diversity in responses. Students reproduce the elements of the magazine article in these new forms and share their creations with the class. A conversation ensues afterward about what students have noticed. They may compare and contrast genre features, but they may very well notice many other things.

There is no guarantee that what will emerge out of this specialization for mutual effect will necessarily be oriented toward outcomes the teacher desires. Even so, while the teacher is not
in control of the dynamic, she has a responsibility to be attentive to emergent possibilities in the classroom. In an intelligent classroom, situations and ideas arise that the teacher has not anticipated. Intelligence, in complexity thinking, is not located inside a person or even inside a brain: “Intelligence is all about being able to initiate the next move in real-world situations. It is located in the space of activity where the agent meets the world” (p. 130).

One of the activities where the agent meets the world is writing. “Writing is an act of thought and reformulation; it is a recursively elaborative process that affects interpretations of experiences” (p. 142). It also has an imaginative dimension that invites the writer to formulate images to represent thinking, structure narratives to account for these images and imagine a reader who will interpret and respond to these representations. All writing is fictionalized in the sense that all reports “reflect writers’ partialities—conscious and unconscious. They are as much about the perceiver (including the personal and social conditions of perception) as they are about the phenomenon perceived” (p. 142). Experience is always larger than attempts to interpret and represent it, but the writer has a number of tricks at her disposal to provide access to experiences for the reader. Davis et al. (2008) describe how the same cluster of neurons is activated whether one is imagining an experience or actually engaging in the activity. One’s sphere of experiences can be expanded through the sharing of the represented experience of others.

In the next chapter, I will sketch how writing is construed in this dissertation beginning with my personal experiences as the context for my thinking. At the end of the chapter, I take up the theoretical framework for the place-responsive writing practices that were explored in this study.
Chapter 4
Writing Within a Web of Relations

In this chapter, I will outline the approach I took to teaching writing in Fort Simpson before introducing the theoretical underpinnings for the writing theory I propose.

The writers’ workshop in Fort Simpson

When the secretary first opened the door to my classroom, I was pleased with how spacious it was and glad of the light coming through the large windows, of the storage space in two walls of honey-colored cupboards and all of the room to display student work on the many bulletin boards. My classroom had plenty of counter space at the back and even had a sink. The front wall was almost solid blackboards (perhaps more properly called greenboards). I set up the classroom so that the students sat two to a table in rows, but we frequently reconfigured the classroom for group work and our whole-class conversations sometimes occurred in chairs in a circle at the back of room. My first lessons to the dozen or so Dene and Métis and half a dozen non-Dene kids who represented my high school English classes fell very flat. The more enthusiasm I manifested about what we would be doing, the more they greeted me with silence; the more they were silent, the more I talked and gestured wildly with my hands (later, when we knew one another better, the students teased me about talking with my hands). In the first days of my teaching, very few students uttered even one unprompted word.

The elementary school class sizes were often comparable to schools in the South, with around 25–28 students, although secondary class sizes were small by Southern standards. I once had a Grade 10 split English class of both academic and general level students with 31 students and another time, due to scheduling glitches, I had a general level Grade 10 class of eight students—but these were exceptions. Although the classes in non-compulsory high school
subjects classes were small, my compulsory English classes numbered around 20 students. In time, the students became active participants in discussions and my ‘bulk reading’ program grew to be especially effective. The progressive philosophy, to which I ascribed at the time, was to encourage students to read as many books as they could (thus the title “bulk reading”) with some time for reflection or comments on the book but without the requisite book report which might have accompanied such programs in other philosophical approaches. Later in my career in Yellowknife, literature circles were my alternative to individualized reading programs that accompanied the texts we studied as a whole class.

While I was teaching in Fort Simpson, I read a great deal of writing by Canadian Indigenous writers and any Northern ones I could come across as I believed that Indigenous resources in the classroom are key to engaging Indigenous students (e.g. Curwen Doige, 1999). Now, there are more Indigenous NWT writers from which to draw than there were then. My students were fond of Jordan Wheeler’s (1989) book Brothers in Arms and later Richard Van Camp’s stories. They especially liked Wheeler’s story “Hearse in the Snow,” which brings two estranged brothers together in a hearse bearing their father’s coffin after a terrible snowstorm drives them off the road. Northern writer Richard Van Camp’s (1996/2004) story The Lesser Blessed was also much read and provided us with the first-person perspective of a mind that is trying to keep its secrets: In this story as Larry negotiates relationships with a busy mother and kindly stepfather, with his troubled friend Johnny and with teachers at his high school, Larry’s mind slides dangerously close to truths he doesn’t want to reveal. I also read some Native American writers, particularly Sherman Alexie, Louise Erdrich, Linda Hogan, Leslie Marmon Silko and N. Scott Momaday, and I recall some of the young men in my classes enjoyed novels by James Welch.
In my reading, I often chose books that took place in Indigenous environments, such as Thomson Highway’s play *The Rez Sisters* (1988). The women in this story have dreams that give the readers insight into their characters. The sisters believe that the answer for the conditions in their lives could lie at the biggest bingo in the world in Toronto and they manage to raise the necessary money to go. On the way, the reader is privy to the poignant back stories of the women.

One year in a Grade 12 class, I had the young women study *The Rez Sisters* while the young men studied *Dry Lips Oughtta Move to Kapuskasing* (1989). As a whole class, another group studied Thomas King’s (1989) book *Medicine River* which also takes place in a world that is almost exclusively Indigenous. This story, like Richard Wagamese’s (1994) *Keeper ‘n Me*, features urban men who have returned to their community and are not sure if they wish to stay.

In addition to finding literature that I was able to share with my students, the books also gave me the opportunity to see the world through Indigenous perspectives, to deal with the issues the characters dealt with, to negotiate the trials and joys of their daily living, to share in the humor, morality, spirituality, politics of the characters. I explored their thoughts, intentions and beliefs as they negotiated their relationships with themselves, their cultural identity in particular, their relationships with family, friends and lovers along with their relationship with their community and their ancestral territory and their relationship with the white world. The books allowed me to get to know diversity in the expression of Indigenous identity and to consider the way traditional cultures overlapped with Western cultures.

The characters in these books lived a multiplicity of experiences. Some dealt with explicit issues of racism such as Campbell’s *Halfbreed* (1973), an autobiographical account of Campbell’s childhood and young adult life that includes a historical perspective and Beatrice Culleton’s (1984) *April Raintree*, which in the late ’80s was my students’ all-time favourite book. The main characters, April and her sister Cheryl, are of mixed ancestry and struggle to understand
their cultural sense of self, as does Tayo in Marmon Silko’s (1977) *Ceremony* and Abel in Momaday’s (1968) *House Made of Dawn*. Some of the characters return to traditional practices to make meaning in their lives while others do not. Most of the characters in the books I read were extremely resilient: Dene writer Robert Alexie’s whose first novel’s title *Porcupine and China Dolls* is a reference to the appearance of the Indigenous children whose hair has been cut and skin has been scrubbed raw in the first day of their entry into residential schools; the porcupines in the title make a similar sound to the children crying at night.

I became aware of the ways that some Indigenous writers were working with form. My reading exposed me to cyclical structures, as in *House Made of Dawn*; stories arranged by place rather than time as in Thomas King’s (1994) *Green Grass, Running Water* and connections to oral traditions as in Alexie’s (2002) *Porcupines and China Dolls*. I taught the writer’s ‘craft’ as part of my English Language Arts classes and made my senior students aware of the structural choices that these writers were making, but I regret that I did not do as much as I might have. My students were, for the most part, enthusiastic about literature by Indigenous writers and I might have made greater connections from their reading to their writing. I fear that, in those days, the strands of English Arts remained separate in my mind; consequently, I did not see opportunity when it presented itself.

In general, my students enjoyed group work and loved conversation, but when it came to writing, some of them routinely laid their heads down on folded arms on their desks. Some sighed audibly at the end of my introduction to the day’s events when they included writing activities. I wasn’t always clear whether the students disliked writing altogether or only an aspect of what I suggested. Sometimes I wondered whether I had simply done a bad job of explaining the task. However, I didn’t always have to interpret the physical responses of my students to orient my lessons because luckily I also had someone like ‘Sara,’ a student whom others characterized as a
person “who speaks her mind.” She helped me to direct my instructions and lessons through
cociferous refrains of “What do you mean?” or “I don’t get it. What do you want us to do?” or
“Why are we doing this?” But despite her help, I often felt perplexed because I didn’t know what
I could do or should do differently to engage my students in writing. My students’ behavior often
led me to believe that what I proposed was difficult or frustrating, boring or irrelevant. I had
arrived steeped in ideas about would be best to facilitate students’ development as writers and
those ideas weren’t serving us very well.

I refused the easy answer that there was something wrong with my students. Over my
years of teaching in the North, I have encountered many teachers, including the eight who
participated in my study, who suspended judgments in favor of an open-ended evolving
understanding of their students. However, I am afraid that I also encountered those who were
willing to interpret student behaviors in limiting or even racist ways. It is not as though I was or
am not now, without my prejudices. My own understanding about how to teach writing is
founded in more than my teacher training; it is steeped in the traditions of my upbringing and
education—many political, social, cultural and geographical influences, some of which I chose
but many of which wend their way through my thinking without conscious choice.

Writing theory for Northern places

In my study, I took an ethical orientation within a phenomenologically grounded analysis
of place that recognized the complex reality of teaching. I wanted to examine the possibilities for
writing theory that emerge out of an awareness of the dynamic, place-saturated character of
human life. This pedagogy includes an attunement to the words of a place. It is a pedagogy of
“witnessing and paying attention” (Blood and Chambers, CSSE, 2009), where “it is important to
see what you see and also to note what you don’t see—to see what is missing in a place.” This
pedagogy is challenging in Northern places where writing is a relatively new cultural practice and where this writing occurs in English, an imposed language, in a place where a few students are still first-language speakers of Dene or Inuvialuktun, where some have parents who are, and many have grandparents who are.

In an interview with Lutz (1991), Maria Campbell speaks of the difficulty she had telling her stories in English until she came to terms with the storytelling traditions of her own people, the Métis, such that she was able to manipulate English rather than feeling she was manipulated by it. It may prove equally difficult to tell stories that are emplaced in Northern locations, given that writing and more recently electronic print and imagery, as Abram (1997) implies, is often one of the tools of human individual-centered worldviews that disregard and despoil the more-than-human aspects of place. In northern schools we often take an instrumentalist stance toward writing meant to lead toward demonstrable achievement in conventional literacy (where a few will be excellent, most will be acceptable, and many will be unacceptable). This stance can be displaced or at least juxtaposed to a stance that allows us to see writing as it emerges out of varied and interesting, and conflicted places in the Northwest Territories.

The writing theory with which I work fits under the umbrella term of post-process writing. Current concerns in the field include visual rhetoric, writing that involves civic participation, digital/new media, and an ongoing interest in interdisciplinary approaches (what used to be called writing across the curriculum). These disparate concerns may not initially appear to be united by any commonality; however, it is possible that all might fall under the umbrella that is post-process composition theory, although many scholars may not necessarily self-identify under that overarching concept. Those who identify themselves as, or are identified by others as post-process theorists, have varied and widely diverging interests (Heard, 2008). It can be safely posited however, that “[m]ost post-process theorists hold three assumptions about
the act of writing: (1) writing is public; (2) writing is interpretive; and (3) writing is situated” (Kent, 1999).

The writing theory that framed my practice was taken from process pedagogy. Process writing, largely influenced by studies of what experienced writers do, is writing as a procedure-oriented activity that emphasizes the cognitive activities of individuals during the composing process. While any text in its final form is the product of physical activity and cognitive processes in which the writer recursively engages, problems arise when matters of place are subordinated to universalist notions of the process through which the writer arrives at good writing. Instead of worrying, as so many new teachers of English seem to do, that they don’t possess enough knowledge about English grammar, the new teacher might ask instead what she needs to know and to do to best teach writing where she is. She may notice the way people in the community use language, consider the kinds of writing students do willingly, reflect upon the experiences that students might bring to their writing and ensure she shares in some of those experiences so that she will know how to set up appropriate writing practices. She may catch herself, as I once did, part-way through a lesson on the “conflicts” in writing: man versus man, man versus himself and man versus nature and when she realizes how inappropriate her lesson is for the place where she is teaching, she will transform her lesson mid-sentence into one about modernist Western thinking and invite students to consider how writing about people and their psyches, about people and their relationship to others and to the more-than-human world might be otherwise. She will guard against other miseducational experiences including the unfortunate possibility for process writing that transforms procedural approaches to writing into the new content that is delivered to students (Kastman-Breuch, 2002).

Process writing originated as a response to a rather rigid system of composition that emphasized grammar and syntax, which James Berlin (1980) later labeled “current-traditional
rhetoric.” I cannot help but wonder whether Berlin was responding to a rigid theory or to rigid practices that came about as a result of the commodification of theory that occurs as ideas are taken up by the textbook industry. Aspects of rhetorical traditions can still be helpful today; I contend that modeling from writer’s texts still has pedagogic value. Nevertheless, Berlin reacted to pedagogic practices that were not dynamic and flexible—done more, perhaps, out of historical habit than purposeful choice.

As the process movement in composition was largely influenced by studies of what experienced writers do, these studies yielded an awareness of the importance of audience, purpose, and context and they placed importance upon what writers do while they compose. The implications of these tenets about writing for composition in classrooms were that plenty of practice was necessary and time was needed for invention and revision activities. According to Olson (1999), the process writing movement allowed teachers to see that writing is composed of many activities, is recursive not linear, and can be a means of learning and discovery. I am glad that writing is no longer considered a mop-up activity, assigned to tidy up the loose ends of a unit of study, written at home alone, handed in, marked up with a red pen by the teacher, and given a percentage or letter grade. The “process” of writing was deemed more important than the product and effective instruction required intervention by the teacher and this too is important learning to have come out of this movement.

However, for Dobrin (1999), the process paradigm is rooted in what he sees as a process philosophy: “a dominant tradition in Western thinking” (p.136) that has guided human inquiry in science, history, and cartography, which is essentially “linear and phallocentric” (p. 135). Process philosophy is not only physically reductionist, but also conceptually reductionist, in that the explanation of all ‘things’ epistemological, ontological and conceptual are products of a process. For Reynolds (2004), process often means temporal, whereby writing becomes a time-
bound concept that overwhelms the everyday experience of writing. For Dobrin, the effects of process theory on classroom practice have been the creation of unproblematicized environments where what actually goes on is the teacher’s vision of “process”—what prewriting, drafting and revising should look like—a re-inscription of knowledge that perpetuates inscribed methods of inquiry. Reynolds (2004) also reminds us that drafts may be a silly requirement when most writing is done on the fluid, spatial medium of electronic writing technologies. For many students in the Northwest Territories, composing is done on computers at school.

Kent (1999), in his influential book *Post-Process Theory: Beyond the Writing-Process Paradigm*, develops his understandings for post-process writing out of the assertion that the practice of writing cannot be captured by a generalized theory. For Kent, writing is an activity not a body of knowledge. Writing is a public exchange that requires interpretive interaction with others. Meaning is not stable but rather a product of our communicative interaction with others, as opposed to a product of an individual mind. To acknowledge the public nature of writing means to acknowledge a reading audience. Writers are always situated and they always write from some position. Beyond writing correctly, writers work toward communicating their message to an audience even if that audience is themselves.

I see potential in post-process theories that construe writing as an activity and as an interpretive act (Kent, 1999) to transform and expand upon many of the ideas of process writing theory. Here, I am assuming that we are not working from a commoditized version of process-writing pedagogy that oversimplifies complex phenomenon. I take up Petraglia’s (1999) idea that it is not so much that we need to dismiss process writing but rather that we need to go beyond it. What we learned from process writing has been backgrounded as we recognize that writing pedagogy should change with the situation and rhetoric involves an interpretation of the social, cultural, historical and political elements of human communication (McComiskey, 2000).
Since the 1970s and 1980s, the social aspect of language has been a prime concern in composition studies, but Dobrin and Weisser (2002) contend that issues of ecology, environment, place, location, and habitat have been left out of the critical discussions of composition until fairly recently. In the seminal text of ecocomposition, Cooper’s (2006/1986) “The Ecology of Writing,” writing is an ecology that includes natural and social relations. The fundamental tenet of the ecological model of writing that she puts forward is “that writing is an activity through which a person is continually engaged with a variety of socially constituted systems” (p.186) to which I would add the systems of the more-than-human enchanted world. The ecological model explores how writers interact to form systems that are made and remade by writers as they enact writing.

Weisser (2001) notes that pedagogical approaches to composition expanded to account for a variety of influences on a writer’s identity, particularly as it shifted from a model of “the solitary, detached writer to the interconnected network of other humans” (p. 84); he is most interested in the relationship between place and identity. He stresses that composition’s current conceptions of identity do not account for the degree to which various ecosystems and their inhabitants affect the production of discourse. In fact, he suggests that discussions and considerations of identity have been “constricted by the underlying premise that our identities are fashioned only through our connections with other humans” (p. 81). He believes, as I do, that we are influenced and affected by the more-than-human world, just as we are affected by our social interactions. Indigenous scholars, (Deloria, 1994; Vizenor, 1993; Silko, 1996) share “recognition that the material world ‘out there’ is part of our identity ‘in here’” (Weisser, p. 86).

Dobrin (2001) urges compositionists to think of the environment as more than geographic location, calling for a collapsing of environment and locale so that human relationships and discourse can be seen as mutually supportive—a determination which can only be made at the
local level. He wants ecocomposition to move beyond environmentalist concerns in order to examine “concepts of environment, location, space, and place as encompassing all of the spaces we inhabit” (p. 24)—a desire that has not yet been met, as many compositionists consider ecocomposition to be focused on environmental-discourse concerns.

Drawing from cultural geography rather than ecology, Reynolds’ (2004) book *Geographies of Writing: Inhabiting Places and Encountering Difference* is a broad study of the possibility that opens the discussion to the way that writing theory can draw from cultural geography. Reynolds argues that composition studies must engage the metaphorical implications of place without ignoring materiality. By focusing on what she terms the “spatial practices of the everyday” (such as walking, mapping, and dwelling), Reynolds uses qualitative research with geography students at the University of Leeds to investigate questions of difference and identity.

Writing, as it comes to us in books and electronic texts, appears as though it is placeless. Kent (1999) argues that “writers are never nowhere” (p. 3) and Vanderburg and Clary-Lemon (2006) highlight the connectedness between the writer, reader and the situatedness of all of the places they occupy, including physical sites. Writing, too, they point out is so often expressed in spatial metaphors which figure writing as a location. In academia, they contend, writers are encouraged to write their way into a “hyperreality,” a conceptual or transcendent where whose authority in some way derives from the perception of being cut loose from place and time” (p. 95). I hold that, in many ways, Southern teachers ask Northern students to write a reality that is not theirs.

Fleckenstein (2007) argues that a narrative of displacement is apparent in the American education system. When the events and artifacts and ideas of schooling do not reflect the values of the students, the students find them meaningless. These students, who are themselves constructed out of these events, artifacts and ideas in schools, are thereby construed as
meaningless by those in authority. Students blame themselves and exile themselves from learning. For Fleckenstein, it is essential that hostile places be transformed into compassionate places.

Malpas offers one possibility for this transformation when he says, “one grasps the subjectivity of other individuals, in fact, through being able to match one’s own responses to those of others and through being able to locate others within an objective space to which each has access” (p. 149). When the classroom becomes a meeting place of particulars, place is not static but is a product of perception and articulation, what Fleckenstein calls “a sensuous, coproduced and dynamic reality” (p. 152). She follows Basso (1996) for whom place and people are reciprocally linked; they are interanimated. When place is perceived as fixed, she says, then inhabitants are rendered passive, but when place is seen as complex, fluid and dynamic, “[p]eople everywhere act on the integrity of their dwelling” (Basso, p. 11).

When place is theorized as a dynamic, complex structure comprised of the interdependent and relational systems of subject and object, space and time, self and other, then place-conscious writing theory can take into account the relationship between discourse and genre systems to real and imaginary social and physical places. Place-conscious writing theories would necessarily be fluid and dynamic; however, in northern places they may draw from traditional Indigenous precepts, similar, perhaps, to the principles of storywork that Archibald (2008) outlines: “respect, responsibility, reverence, reciprocity, holism, interrelatedness, and synergy” (p. 153). While living in Fort Simpson, I noted as Basil Johnston (1987), explains in Ojibwa places, that there is a traditional reverence among Indigenous people for speech that derives from its connection to ‘truth.’ I believe this ‘truth’ is a ‘personal truth’ as illustrated by the assertion I heard many, many times at the beginning or end of Dene orations: “I’m speaking from my heart.” The rhetorical emphasis, as I heard it in these orations, was not on persuasion but rather on the ability to
communicate clearly and beautifully what one means to one’s audience. Privileging voice in writing pedagogy could invite practices that allow Northern students to “write from their hearts” and might move us toward greater understandings of place-conscious writing theory.

**Possibilities for pedagogies oriented toward developing voices**

I came to my Ph.D. with an intuitive sense that focusing on voice might lead to more engaging and inviting writing practices for Northern students than a full roster of text-based approaches. However, I carried this conviction with some unease. Social constructionist theories have criticized the earlier expressivist process-oriented pedagogy of people like Murray (2004), Emig (1977) and Elbow (2000), who employed the term in their literature, calling them “the new romantics” for whom voice was the unique representation of one person’s creative vision. In the late ’70s and ’80s, these particular process pedagogues employed the term *voice* in response to classical rhetoricians’ view that style is external to the individual and could be taught. Social constructionists believe, however, that context and community shape meaning in ways more powerful than any aspect of an individual’s voice (Johnson & Pace, 2005).

As much as I agree that place shapes meaning, I join Elbow (2008) in my refusal to deprive individual persons of agency. Malpas reminds us that human beings shape place as they are shaped by it. Voice in writing is not a cacophony of voices--the author’s, the characters’, the narrator’s and the reader’s: it is a dynamic, fluid interchange among the language user and other language users, text and other texts, this place and other places. Voice emerges from the Bakhtinian voice-strewn landscape to speak the particularities of an individual voice. Through those particularities, an individual voice connects to the networked relationships of other voices that could be heard and read with, for or against, this one. I fear that reducing writing to a
technology to be mastered undermines the potential for writing to play a central role in shaping the way we live (Cain, 2009).

Despite assertions that the voice metaphor itself has outlived its usefulness, suggesting instead a return to style or even the development of new metaphors such as dance (Bowden, 1999), Elbow (2008) argues that voice is alive and well in writing courses as instructors still resort to the use of the term. He contends that listeners respond to voice—the influence of which is alive and well in politics and also on the internet and in email. Somehow voice in written and oral texts strikes readers as being true or genuine beyond its appropriateness for the genre of audience. Elbow (1998/1981) argues the necessity of attending to voice in texts: He cites Robert Frost who writes of the “dramatic necessity” that “goes deep into the nature of the sentence”—there is a speaking voice in the words for the sake of “the ear of the imagination” (p. 281). Voice is the spoken medium of written language. Boulter and Harper (2005) invite us to remember that anyone listening to the spoken voice is given clues to the speaker’s personal history and the social groups to which the person belongs. Moreover, listeners get a sense of the speaker’s beliefs and desires, carried not only in the content but in the way the content is delivered, for example, in the phrasing and repetitions. The writer’s voice offers similar possibilities for the reader, but the writer has fewer tricks at his or her disposal and is limited by the visual and spatial properties of words on a page or screen. Nonetheless, the writer’s voice is brought to life by a reader’s ear and it is often voice that connects the reader to the text. If the writer can get it right, s/he can seduce the reader into believing. If the reader can get it right s/he can sense the mind that brought the words together.

However, diligently writers work toward making meaning that will be understood, there is no guarantee. This is the challenge and the hope of writing. Perhaps, we can become good enough readers of our own work to suspect that our words might fork some lightning. Over my career, I
saw the flush of recognition on a teenage face as s/he looked up from reading his or her work to glance hopefully at the larger audience that was the class. And there was often a connection between that I-nailed-it-this-time-text and the way it sounded like the writer even as the voice in the text wasn’t quite the writer. When people write prose that has a voice or sounds like a person, their words become more effective at carrying meaning. In oral language, pitch, accent, volume, speed, timbre and rhythm carry meaning; in written language, attention to particular details, rhythm, syntax, imagery, diction and tone, and even the way one works with perspective, carry meaning.

I think of voice as more than style. Voice, according to Matsuda and Tardy (2007) is “one of the terms that has been used to capture the sense of identity in written discourse;” it is the “magical heard quality in writing” (Murray, 2004, p. 195). The heard quality may be experienced as sincerity or confidence or the power of the writer herself, but the magic of the magical heard quality is artifice. A good writer has the necessary skills to create the illusion and effects she desires. Ironically, (perhaps it is the irony and paradox about voice that initially attracted me) imitation of another’s voice can “cut loose a voice and let writers experience the power that comes with a little recklessness, a little letting go of the self and learning the language rhythms and voice habits of another” (Romano, 2004, p. 101). Embedded in the illusion of someone speaking on the page is the way the writer perceives and the subject matter the writer chooses.

I remain convinced, as Elbow (2008) is, that voice serves a purpose, particularly in writing pedagogy with high school students. Elbow purports that voice is helpful for students and others who are not yet sophisticated about language in that it allows them to consider stylistic concerns without having to possess all of the technical language or without having to take an impersonal stance toward their writing. He also argues that it can help students to enjoy writing as the writing task may seem less daunting when the technical know-how required in a text focus is relaxed.
Attention to voice can also help them to become better readers and to recognize the pleasure that occurs for many readers who have the sense that they are making contact with the writer. Boulter (2005) suggests that the writer’s task is not one of “finding one’s voice” but rather finding the means to get the reader to do the work. A reader responds not only because the words carry meaning but because they carry force.

**Laying down a path for voice in writing pedagogy**

Currently, we in the North teach primarily through the text-based approaches subordinating voice to one of the elements as in ‘the six traits plus one’ writing pedagogy (Culham, 2003). Elbow (2008) argues that one does not need to take up an either/or position, nor do I wish to create this binary. Text and voice are interrelated; it is perhaps simply, as Romano (2004) says that “form should be a voice giver, not a voice taker” (p. 59). Elbow argues for both approaches asking teachers to see written language both through the lens of text, which foregrounds language as a system in which words mean the same wherever they are uttered by whomever and also through the lens of voice, which points to the way words come from individuals and differ wherever they are uttered by whomever. “The text lens highlights the visual and spatial features of language as print” while “the voice lens highlights language as sounded, heard, and existing in time” (p. 175). Even as the text lens asks us to see written language as disembodied and removed from places, the voice lens asks us to see written language as embodied and emplaced. In my study, I emphasized voice to consider how this lens might contribute to pedagogic practices that invite Northern students to write.

I have been dissatisfied with Elbow’s “lens” metaphor since I began working with his idea and have tried out various other metaphors until serendipitously the ‘e’ on my computer keypad began sticking and I typed “voice” as “voie.” “Voie,” which is French for “way” or “route” is
also a homonym for “voix” which means “voice.” I wish to avoid any connotations for “The Way” to teach writing, but I can certainly take up the idea that teaching writing through the voice lens means laying down a voice path while teaching writing. In Northern places, I believe that focusing on voice may allow connections to the oral traditions of the places where students live. As complex as this situation is given that many young Northerners speak and write in English, I believe that it is possible for orality and literacy to find a “mutually beneficial meeting place where each has a function” (Archibald, 2008, p. 93). Through the creation of writing practices that invite travel along the voice path, Northern images and idioms, perspectives and visions may creep into students writing. The voice path may also allow students to take on a more comprehensive role as subjective agents making decisions and choices for their writing. By encouraging practices that develop and explore voice, perhaps teachers will compose writing pedagogies more responsive to the places where they teach.
Chapter 5

The Appearance of Shape and Substance in the *Northernvoices* Project

...hermeneutics is a lesson in humility... It understands the power of the flux to wash away the best-laid schemes of metaphysics. It takes the constructs of metaphysics to be temporary cloud formations which, from a distance, create the appearance of shape and substance but which pass through our fingers upon contact...and no matter how wantonly they are skewed across the skies there are always hermeneuts who claim to detect a shape...a bear here, a man with a long nose there. There are always those who claim they can read the clouds and find a pattern and a meaning.

Now, it is not the function of...hermeneutics to put an end to those games, like a cold-blooded, demythologizing scientist who insists that the clouds are but random collections of particles of water...its function is to keep the games in play, to awaken us to the play, to keep us on the alert that we draw forms in the sand, we read clouds in the sky, but we do not capture deep essences...if there is anything that we learn in...hermeneutics it is that we never get the better of the flux (Caputo, 1987, p. 258).

The beginning of my research project: Lessons in humility

Pear-yellow aspen leaves shivered against the grey Precambrian rock as my plane descended into Yellowknife where I would begin my research project. I had hoped that there would not be snow, for at the end of September snow sometimes falls and then melts before it comes to stay around mid-October. There had most certainly been snow six months before when I had arrived in the sharp, snapping cold of February to pilot the methodology of my project at the Territorial Teachers’ Conference. I had received ethical clearance from my university (see Appendix 1) to pilot the writing practices called “voice lessons,” which was the methodology for *Northernvoices* my action research project. I held three taped focus group interviews with participants who elected to stay 30–45 minutes after two-and-a-half hour writing sessions.
Returning at the end of September, 2009, for the beginning of my project, I scheduled five days in Yellowknife—one day to set up the workshop and talk with Peg Pardy, the English Language Arts Coordinator at the Department of Education, Culture and Employment and then the next day for the workshop that would kick off my project, two to sit in on the Department workshops so I could immerse myself in student writing and the fifth for scheduled meetings with northern administrators to learn about current issues and initiatives in NWT education.

At the first face-to-face meeting with the participants, it was my intent to introduce the *Northernvoices* project via a presentation on the wiki, which we would use for future sessions; conduct a writing workshop so that the teachers could get an idea of the kinds of writing they would be doing during the project; ask teachers to reflect after the writing so they would have a model for the reflections they would be asked to post on the wiki; discuss writing practices that engage northern students in a taped semi-structured interview so they would be used to the format and expectations following the writing sessions; and finally, set up a hotmail account for everyone and introduce MSN the live chat platform we would use for discussions about teaching writing in the NWT.

Fourteen teachers attended that first face-to-face meeting. Most had been recruited from a pool of junior/intermediate/senior teachers of English that the Department of Education, Department, Culture and Employment (ECE) was bringing together for a two-day workshop in the Lam Ridge Tower in Yellowknife. Interested teachers came on September 30, 2009, one day before the Department’s workshop, so they could attend mine. Three other participants, who were not involved with the Department’s work, were recruited from the Yellowknife district school boards. At the end of August, 2009, the beginning of the NWT school year, I sent a recruitment letter to the boards and districts in the Northwest Territories after I had received ethics clearance from my University. Peg Pardy, the English Language Arts coordinator had already made the
NWT boards aware of my research through informal conversations. I spoke directly with the assistant superintendents at the two Yellowknife districts. Costs for substitute teachers, in addition to the extra night at a hotel and one day of expenses for out-of-town teachers, were covered by the Department of Education, Culture and Employment (ECE). The boards and districts emailed the recruitment letter to the staff they were sending to the ECE meeting. Teachers interested in participating in the research study, indicated so to the assistant superintendents at their boards and districts, and assistant superintendents conveyed their support for the research project by allowing their teachers to leave their classrooms for the day required to attend the face-to-face meeting.

When I met with the participants on September 30, I began by explaining the project through posts that I had already made on the wiki. I had a computer and a projector so participants could follow visually. I explained the process through which I had received ethical clearance from Queen’s University (see Appendix 2). I asked if anyone had questions and then the participants read the letter of information (see Appendix 3) at the workshop (although letters had also been sent out prior to the workshop) and signed the consent form (see Appendix 4) before the workshop began. By choosing to participate in the study, participants consented to their identification through the subsequent academic presentation of results (i.e., dissertation, publications, and conference presentations). Although participants may be identifiable, efforts were made in this dissertation to conceal their identities through pseudonyms for them and for their communities.

My first writing practice was very well received. We shared our writing with a partner afterward since this would be the only opportunity to share face-to-face during the rest of the project, which would take place online. Following the writing practice there was a taped semi-structured interview (Patton, 2002) —the topic of which was the teachers’ writing as well as their
initial thinking about writing practices that invited their students to engage with writing. In the afternoon, I scheduled time with computers and asked participants to create an autobiographical page on our *Northernvoices* wiki. Participants were invited to consider their writing as a teaching tool that would help us shape the conversations we would have about teaching writing. After the writing practices, we explored our understanding of teaching writing in a 45-minute semi-structured interview (Patton, 2002). Afterward, I talked about the conversations that would occur on MSN following each of the eight writing sessions on the *Northernvoices* wiki, but unfortunately we were not able to practice since MSN was blocked on the government computers.

Toward the end of our day together, I showed the participants the first online writing practice that I had already posted on the wiki and we talked it through before establishing dates for the response posts and the chats to follow. Participants were also made aware that they were posting first-draft writing on the wiki and should not take much more time than was recommended. The writing workshops began mid-October, 2009 on the wiki called *Northernvoices* and were spaced two weeks apart with an MSN conversation in between. The writing practices were designed to take 45 minutes. Participants posted their writing along with a reflection that was supposed to take 10 minutes. The writing itself was not part of what I collected for the data; it was meant to serve as a tool for understanding out of which possible topics for our conversations might emerge. Although the participants were also encouraged to respond on the wiki to one another’s writing, that practice faded by the third workshop. For my data, I collected the written responses to the writing on the wiki and the MSN conversations that occurred after each session.

**The best laid schemes: Plans go awry during the study**

All went well with the first face-to-face workshop until we tried to get on MSN. In the morning, it was evident that participants had varying degrees of familiarity and comfort with the
computers in general and the wiki specifically. Following our wiki work, it was most unfortunate that I was unable to orient participants to MSN live chat, as MSN was blocked by the government’s firewall. I had not anticipated this. I had come in the day before as planned, setting up the work space, checking on computer access for the participants and looking into providing snacks for the workshop. Although I knew that schools in the NWT often blocked MSN, since this had not previously been the case at the Department, I didn’t check into the availability; I was not aware of the Department’s recent policy that blocked social networking sites. When I discovered this on the day of the workshop, I also learned then, as luck would have it, that the IT Department technician was away for inservicing. Instead of actual hands-on exploration, I explained how the MSN chat would work which was not terribly effective for some of the teachers who had not previously accessed MSN.

During the study, we had some difficulties with MSN which I will discuss in the section below. Not all of the participants remained in the study; three left immediately after the first face-to-face workshop and three left during the study. The remaining participants Laurence, Margaret, Eric, Tom, Dave, Liz, Annette and Karen (not their real names) differed in their participation rates; in this dissertation some voices will be heard more often than others although all contributed to the learning project that was this action research.

Laurence is a world traveler, voracious reader and committed writer. He has been involved in numerous extracurricular activities in his school, including leading many writing clubs. He has lived in a regional center for his lengthy teaching career.

Karen was already involved in a major literacy project in her school. She was shy about her writing but very excited to be writing with others.
Annette grew up in the North and is now teaching in her hometown. She declared that she was not much of a writer herself. She enjoyed leading her Intermediate level students through learning in Social Studies and appreciated their abilities as writers.

Margaret was very committed to learning with information communication technology. Indeed, she was committed to life-long learning, in general, as she reads a great deal of the literature by practitioner/researchers, attends and presents at conferences.

Tom had fewer years of experience than some of the other participants but he had already taken many initiatives in his school. He enjoyed writing and like many of the participants was involved in continuing education courses that he took online.

Dave is a self-proclaimed outdoorsman and brings that passion to the classroom. He also declared that he thought of himself very much as “a family man.”

Liz taught a wide range of ability levels in her high school courses and said she enjoyed the challenge that diversity brings. She indicated that she was happy to be writing as the busy life of teaching took her away from some of the things she liked to do.

Eric leads a busy life. He was doing his Master’s degree online during the Northernvoices project, had a young family, and was very involved in his school and with activities outside of it. He indicated that he enjoys trying new things and that writing is very important to him.

**Difficulties with MSN: Data wantonly skewed across the sky**

After the initial set back at the September workshop, other difficulties ensued with MSN during the action research project. I had chosen to conduct my research using electronic media because I wanted to have representation from across the Territories and this was the only feasible way to accomplish this. Electronic media offered the opportunity to space the practices out over time (from the end of September to the end of April). That participants could contribute in two
face-to-face workshops that bookended the study, meant that there was some variety in the ways they might contribute. Additionally, I wanted to join with others in the North who are encouraging teachers to become more comfortable with information communication technology (ICT) as it can serve to reduce professional isolation by bringing teachers together for dialogue and sharing of resources. I am not comfortable with ICT myself; when people invite me to “just play with it” after they’ve shown me something on ICT, the invitation doesn’t make sense to me. When I play, I write, garden, walk the dog, tell or listen to funny stories—I don’t click things on the computer to see what they will do. I use ICT when I have to and I play with it when my knowledge no longer meets a need, but I also seek out the help of willing technophiles. My 15-year-old son was my tech support throughout my research project.

It was not my initial intent to use MSN as the platform for communication; however, when I investigated possibilities while in Yellowknife for the pilot study in February, the requirements for bandwidth with other platforms would limit localities where I could offer the project. As I wanted my project to be open to whoever wished to participate, MSN became the most egalitarian choice. Ironically, the only participant who would have had band-width issues left the project after the internet was down in her community for a month. The remaining participants could have used another platform, but we were already established on MSN so we continued.

The participants in the project did not let setbacks stop them so I am very satisfied with the data I collected from our eight MSN conversations, despite some challenges. Tribulations included: a) repairs to the MSN site on the date of one of our scheduled chats, b) initial confusion over who invites whom to the chat, c) appearing offline during a scheduled conversation, d) getting logged out of the conversation while it is in progress, e) typographical errors (typos), f) response confusion engendered when people are word processing their
responses to a comment at the same time, without knowing what the others are writing, and g) the reality that MSN exists as a social networking site and brings with its use all of the connotations of how one responds on a social site to what I intended to be scholarly conversations. What follows are some excerpts from the transcripts to illustrate these tribulations. Given that our first trial was a repair to the MSN site that meant we were unable to proceed as planned, I won’t provide an illustration. Here are some examples of the other difficulties:

b) initial confusion over who invites whom to the chat:

   M: I think I clicked on the wrong spot and only had you listed. Now I’ve clicked on the Northern Voices group.

   S: You are fine.

   M: Is anyone else with us?

   c) appearing offline:

   E: I see L has just signed in.

   S: I don’t see him on my screen!

   E: Now he’s offline…

   S: He didn’t ever show up as online for me. Strange!

   E: I’m speaking to L on another page… says he appears offline but is obviously online

   S: I’m speaking to him too on another page… made some suggestions…perhaps we’ll get this figured out

   d) getting logged out of the conversation:

   Message on screen – M has joined the conversation.

   M has left the conversation.

   Message on screen – M has joined the conversation.

   95
M has left the conversation.

S: M you are a jack-in-the box!

e) typos:

S: We were talking about students’ awareness of their writing ‘moves’. Do you think students think in terms of making hcocies when they write?

L: What are hcocies?

f) crafting responses at the same time

S: We were talking about students’ awareness of their writing ‘moves’. Do you think students think in terms of making hcocies when they write?

S: woops choices

L: What are hcocies?

When participants are writing responses at the same time, the researcher has to keep the conversation focused especially through the disjointedness that can occur when people respond to differently or as in the above example when L’s question appeared a microsecond after the correction that makes the question unnecessary.

g) MSN is a social networking site

That MSN exists firstly as a social networking site may also bring some additional challenges: One participant was unable to turn off some of the shimmering texts and icons she routinely used on the site so, for example, every time she wrote “they” it appeared as an undersized “t” in regular font followed by a large, flashing yellow “hey!” which continued to flash through the entire conversation. On social networking sites, multiple conversations may occur at once; while this was not the case with this
study, this capacity of MSN to allow several conversations to take place on different sites at once may have been what prompted one participant to comment: “I’m not sure you are talking to me too,” before he shared his thoughts.

Since the time of my study, the Department of Education has other platforms for synchronous conversations at its disposal, which might be more compatible for the professional nature of research conversations. To overcome these problems listed above, I would recommend using a stable, professional, closed platform. Nonetheless, in the spirit of making do with the resources we had at our disposal, we utilized MSN to the best of its capabilities.

Cycles in the action research: To keep the games in play

In my conception of the project, I resisted what Whitehead and McNiff (2006) call the “performance-management” style of action research, with its rationalist, managerial model of problem-definition-to-action plan. Instead, I saw the action research as a circle—an understanding closer, perhaps, to the seminal vision of Lewin in 1944, for whom action research was a spiral of steps (as cited in McNiff, 1994). I hoped this conception was closer to the significance of the circle in Indigenous thought: “[T]he circular concept requires all ‘points’ that make up the sphere of being to have a significant identity and function” (Gunn Allen, 1986, p.59). In my conception of the action research circle, the points were not only the participants who made up the research circle but also the elements of the research study that needed to remain in harmony with the project as it unfolded. Additionally, “the points” were the concepts that emerged along from our eight sessions and measured against their fit within the revolving ideas of the study.
I thought of the action research project as a co-operative inquiry (Reason and McArdle, 2004), that is, a group of people who share a common concern for developing understanding and practice in a specific, professional or social arena. In this case, the group consisted of experienced teachers who were interested in thinking about writing. All were co-researchers, as their thinking generated ideas that assisted in the design of the project and all were also co-subjects who participated in the activity. The cycles of this study did not involve cycles of identifying, determining, actualizing and evaluating (Mills, 2003); rather they were the recurring cycles of composing the writing practices, reflecting and developing theoretical perspectives during the MSN conversations. These perspectives informed the next cycle of writing, reflecting and conversing.

In the cycles of writing, the participants wrote through “Voice lessons” a methodology that drew from Romano, (2004), Elbow (2000), Grainger et al. (2005), Archibald (2008), and numerous books from the popular presses that suggest writing prompts and activities. Participants were given a prompt that set the constraints for the writing; for example, this was one of the writing prompts from the face-to-face writing workshop:

Choose a central dramatic incident in your life in the place where you teach.

a. Write about it in the first person. (10 minutes)
b. Take the first paragraph and rewrite it in the 3rd person. (5 minutes)
c. Take the p.o.v. of another person in the life-world of your narrative and rewrite one paragraph of your story from that person’s perspective. (5 minutes)
d. Now consider how this story would differ in a radically different setting. Write one paragraph of the story as it would occur there. (5 minutes)
Within the two week interval, the participants were generally asked to do two or more writing practices that would extend or challenge the writing from the first practice. Writing practices included such prompts as the following: write in the voice of one of your students, mimic the voices of one of five Indigenous authors (Susan Aglukark, Sherman Alexie, Jeannette Armstrong, Thomas King, and Richard Wagamese), explore the voice of someone you know who has experienced a significant amount of life lived in the tension between desire and circumstances, explore voice in a piece that utilizes phrases that you would love to scream at the top of your lungs if you felt you could, write a piece that draws from memory, look back over your writing and consider some of the aspects of your own writer’s voice, write from the sensory details of a place, model a piece of emplaced writing, consider a place that once was important to you, consider a place that is important to you, consider a place in your community that you walk by all of the time and take for granted. Here is an example of Eric’s reflection on writing about a place in his community:

I had a bit of a tough time narrowing a location down until I thought about the histories of some of the places here in Willowtown. I decided to write about the Motorola, the old nightclub that was replaced by the current Fireside Hotel. I had only gone to the Motorola few times but it was a fun place, for sure. I don’t know if I would consider this a happy piece or one of angst, but it was enjoyable to write. I tried to juxtapose as much as I could to really stress the change that has occurred. Coming from the perception of a rockin’ musician I thought I could make it more extreme. The students would have no problem picking out a place. They would find the description of that place challenging. They write what they see, unless they’re really shown that there are other ways of perceiving things. I would definitely have a few lessons on perception and descriptive writing before I ever gave them this assignment. They need to learn to write with their senses: when you picture
this place, what do you see, smell, hear, taste, feel? When they know this and can describe this it is a big step in their descriptive writing (obviously!).

Participants at the face-to-face workshop shared their work and discussed orally, but otherwise the sharing occurred as posts on the wiki and synchronous one-hour conversations on MSN. The initial question that prompted the discussion emerged out of the writing workshop but the conversation followed its own path afterward. For example the question “So about discussion...what role does it play in your writing pedagogy with kids?” morphed into a conversation about the importance of detail in writing. There was also movement within the writing workshops themselves. The flow writing requires participants to respond immediately to a prompt without brainstorming and to keep their pen moving, i.e., to write for the entire timed allotted (Elbow, 2000). Strategies were provided at the first face-to-face writing workshop so that participants knew how to respond to the idea of flow writing, although most were very familiar with the concept and utilized the practice in their work with students. Over the course of the workshop, expectations became more demanding as participants became familiar with the conceptions and format of the practices. For example, given that participants had already done writing practices with sensory images and different perspectives, they were able to tackle the eighth writing practice, which is described below:

**Eighth Writing Workshop: Writing about a place**

**Step one: The Prelude**

Pick a place in your town upon which you will focus your attention. Choose a place that you pass by quite often.

*Paying attention:* Each time you pass by that place in the week, stop and pay special attention to it. Pay attention to specific detail. Pay attention to finding just the right word to capture something about the place.
Imagining: In addition to paying attention, imagine some things about the place. How has that place changed through time? Imagine the people who might have passed through or over that same place. Imagine what the place “knows.” Imagine some of the stories in and of that place.

Thinking synectically: In addition to paying attention and imagining, try to think differently about the place. If the place were an article of clothing, what would it be? If the place were a color, what would it be? What song would you set in this place? If you were going to capture “the essence” of this place would you take pictures, make a film, a dance, a recipe…?

Step two: The Writing
Write a short story or poem whose main character has an errand to run. The character is, in some way, involved with the place you chose. Have your character interact with the world. Don’t be afraid to invade the thoughts of the character.

(as usual, do what you need to do. Pay attention to as much or as little of the writing assignment in step two as you need to. The assignment is mean to offer “enabling constraints. Use what enables.

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The synchronous conversations that followed the writing workshops were intended to serve as a focused thinking-together of a topic that emerged out of the writing. Comments from participants like: “I hope that I have been of help” made it clear that participants understood my purpose. The teachers may have had their own purposes for participation in the study. If teachers are to take back the professional integrity that scholars like Pinar (2004) feel that teaching has lost, action research projects can help them reclaim their agency. I anticipated that the teachers might become more conscious of the theoretical underpinnings of their own work, and through reflection, gain more understanding. I thought they might “begin to notice and locate patterns of repetition and points of resistance—both of which become important sites for personal and collective interpretations” (Sumara, 1996, p. 45). In my role as the leader of the circle, I refined the methodological tools to suit the exigencies of the situation, and collected, analyzed, and presented data on an ongoing cyclical basis. Moreover, I was also a participant in the study as I wrote along with the participants, posted my writings, read and responded to the posts of others.
on the wiki; in the words of Luce-Kapler (1997): The writer who initiates the research, creates the space, becomes implicated” (p. 67).

**Plan for the action research: Temporary cloud formations**

Originally, I thought the voice lesson might have two phases. The first phase would ask teachers to consider their writing as a hermeneutic inquiry into the place where they are living and teaching. My thinking was that while place-based pedagogies often take students out of the school building and into other spaces in the community, I would take the teachers thinking about writing and pedagogy out of the building. Writing pedagogies that are concerned with place often focus on buildings or schools or classrooms, as in Clandinin’s work. My intent was to share the stated aim of Nagelhout and Rutz (2004) in *Classroom Spaces and Writing Instruction* to consider the way that literal and figural spaces mediate and affect what writing teachers do in classroom spaces, indirectly, rather than head on. I wanted the teachers to move away from the familiar domestic images of schooling and the familiar ways of talking about what children do, in terms of their appropriate development over time. The second phase would deal specifically with writing pedagogy. My thinking was that after the initial phase which asked them to think about their own writing and its relationship to place, they would be more inclined to think of writing pedagogy in terms of place-consciousness.

It became clear, as early as the first face-to-face workshop, that the teachers could not shut off their teacher minds. They automatically thought of what we were doing in the writing workshops in terms of what they did with their students, whether what we did might work with them or not. Although I made it clear that the writing practices I designed were created for them—experienced teachers who were comfortable with writing—and not intended as practices that they could take away and try with their
students, it was equally clear to me that the teachers were not going to be able to wait until phase two began in January to talk about teaching writing with their students. Out of an awareness of place, I proposed that the pedagogic impetus for teachers should not be so much on what to teach, but rather how to orient one’s pedagogy and to navigate within the place where one teaches. Teachers must act like Malpas’s topographical surveyor (2005) who is actively involved in the landscape, attending to the interrelationship of the elements of which it is composed. In the Northwest Territories, attending to place will require deep engagement with another culture, in addition to continual reflexivity that reveals other aspects of the teacher’s place – to help her to see what she sees and to hear what she hears but also to note what is missing in the place she teaches.

When it became apparent that the workshops would not proceed with a clear divide between phase one (October to December) and then phase two (January to March), I rethought my plan. My original focus for phase two, putting the emphasis on writing pedagogy became integrated into the work we were doing on place which continued through all of the writing workshops. Many of the teachers in my study engaged with places outside of the school; many were skiers, hikers, dog walkers, campers, boaters, community board members, and volleyball players. Yet in the final face-to-face workshop when we deliberately considered significant places, first anywhere and then in the communities where they worked, the teachers were surprised to discover that they wrote about school when they were writing about the community where they lived, while their other writing had been very vivid; for example, writing about the front porch of a significant house, as one example. So much of the way we relate as teachers in Northern
communities is through our roles as teachers, but of course our students have many relationships that extend beyond their relationship to school.

The purposes and goals and aims for the study for the teachers differed from mine. I wanted teachers to consider their writing as a hermeneutic inquiry into writing that is place-conscious. Given all that has been written about the opaque nature of the notion of place (Casey, 1997; Malpas, 1999) this may, in part, explain why teachers approached the study differently than I. I had hoped that the writing practices might help teachers consider the relationship between teaching writing and the place where they teach it. Writing, according to van Manen (1997) distances us from “our immediate lived involvements with the thing of this world” (p.125) but curiously it also draws us closer to this life-world by allowing us to ponder the existential structures of our experiences. Writing also exposes our epistemologies and the way we know those epistemologies. Paradoxically, while writing seems to take us away from the particulars of our experience to more universal concerns as we try to capture meaning, it will eventually take us back to the particulars.

I have had many years of ruminating over place, although I did not think of place as a theoretical framework until I came to graduate school. Nonetheless, place has not been as opaque, for me, as Casey (1996; 1999) contends it is for most people. The teachers in my study have their own philosophical understandings that inform their way of being in the world and their own theoretical frameworks which they bring to bear on the teaching of writing. Their work in our think-together was to provide data for the study; theorizing was my work. Through workshops, courses and professional reading,
the teachers in this study were well-versed in the contemporary ways of thinking about teaching writing in schools. No practitioner texts from Pearson or Heinemann, two popular presses for teachers, approach the teaching of writing from place-conscious frameworks. Many authors of these texts, write about adapting their recommendations to the teaching context; but this is not at all how I was thinking about the importance of place in my study. I suspect that our Northernvoices group would have benefited from more face-to-face interaction to get to the heart of what I would have liked us to explore, in depth. A week together at a writing retreat, might have garnered different results.

Additionally, I was unable to ask participants to share and talk between writing sessions as I had been able to do at the February pilot project in the two-and-a-half-hour face-to-face workshops. I suggested prompts for the talk at those sessions, which directed what might happen in the next writing session and ultimately, how we might discuss writing pedagogy in the focus interview. The lack of any discussion, directed or not, may also have influenced the emphasis that emerged out of the writing sessions in the action research project. But despite that the focus was not as I might have hoped for, it is not as though we did not have many heartening conversations about teaching writing in the NWT. In the end, in this dissertation, it is not my intent to account for the actions that the teachers took during or after the thinking-together of the study; it is my intent to account for my own.

Workshop analysis: Detecting a shape

The texts of my study were the transcribed oral texts from the group interviews at the September and April face-to-face workshops in Yellowknife, from the written responses to a
reflective question after each writing workshop and from the written texts of the synchronous conversations. One might think that the hermeneutic circle of my study was the dynamic and evolving interaction with the data in whole and in part. I reread and returned to the teachers’ reflections and conversations, recognizing particulars and isolating understandings in order to take the research group back in the next practice to a deeper or richer or more detailed consideration of the possibilities for place-conscious writing practices.

I collected the transcripts from three sources: the group interviews during the face-to-face workshops, the reflections on the wiki and the online chats on MSN. Through the responses on the wiki and online chat interviews, I hoped to “enter into the other person’s perspective” (Patton, 2002, p. 341). I did not use the texts from the writing practices since the writing was a tool to help us get beyond the familiar ways we talk about our students and their writing; I did not mean them to be the objects of study. As I scanned the data from the three sources, I thought about the influences of place on writing practices and the ways that focusing on voice instead of text might lead us to a pedagogy of place. Furthermore, I looked for points of agreement and disagreement between the participants and perceived points of disconnect between what teachers espoused in one response but seemed to be saying in another so as to fold them back into the writing practices.

I analyzed the data as we went, for patterns of connection and disconnection (Gee, 2005) to inform the choices I made for the next voice lesson. In this way, the voice lessons proceeded hermeneutically, circling back over topics that would connect, extend, overlap and contradict. I reflected upon my values and presuppositions through the recursive process of considering my conceptions to whole-group interpretations (Gadamer, 1981). As I set up the conditions for the writing practices, I anticipated that the collective intelligence of the group would bring forth new
information through their reflexion and through our conversations; I watched for this and worked with ideas as they emerged.

**Significant particulars: A bear here, a man with a long nose there**

I looked in the data for what I am calling a “significant particular” to emerge in order to decide the focus for the next writing practice and for the group conversation. This significant particular was not always representative of patterns in the data but rather an idea articulated by one person in dialogue with other people or with the reflective or writing practices texts. Sometimes it was an idea that seems to trouble the other ideas, to stick out as different. On other occasions, it was an idea that was glossed over, seemingly because we couldn’t work with it at the time. This conception of the “significant particular” was linked to the concerns I brought to the study: Someone else looking through the data might have focused on something else to bring forward to the next writing workshop. I follow Caputo (2010) when he argues that I cannot move away from my presuppositions by focusing on the thing itself as it reveals itself. How is it that within “the myriad of impressions-the incessant shower of innumerable atoms” (Virginia Woolf 1982/1953/1925) that shower down upon us, individual attention is caught by some things and not others? Heidegger (1962) asserts that we cannot cordon off our preunderstanding—there is no objective standpoint. The idea of a significant particular is connected to Heidegger’s notion of “fore-having.” In the *Northernvoices* data, I often felt that “there was something there,” something “more to the conversation” than the one we were having. But this chasing after a fuller understanding was based perhaps on the conviction that there was something to be brought together in the incessant thought atoms that that came from puzzling over ideas, researching, and talking with colleagues. So that when I was looking over the data, something resonated and I felt compelled to know more, to extend and expand the thinking. If in these situations, I am right and
the particular is indeed significant in the research circle, it will resonate with others and wend its way back into the next conversation. If I am wrong and it does not resonate with the group, it may only serve to initiate a conversation that others will take in a different direction.

But as the leader of the circle, I can always try to refocus the group’s attention at another time and I am always free to pursue investigations outside of the circle, based on ideas that originated within it. My understanding is preconditioned by previous understandings and this prior understanding is always part of the process. For Gadamer (2004), our ability to make judgments depends on our changing self-understanding. As such, interpretation is not the acquiring of information about what is to be understood but rather the working out of possibilities projected into meaning.

I considered each new writing practice against the understandings that came before (Smith, 1991). I prepared a bank of possible writing practices: jotting ideas in a voice lessons journal, piloting some writing practices with my supervisor, and book marking practices that had foregrounded place or voice in various previous writing practices texts. I did not create specific practices that I planned to use as a teacher might when she is preparing a program of study. I did, however, sketch out plans for 20 practices in my Northernvoices notebook as I wanted to be certain that I had a significant repertoire from which to draw once the 10 workshop sessions began. During the research study, I altered the writing practices I created (only one was taken from a text without alteration), and for two of the workshops returned to books on writing practices from the popular presses to look for practices that I remembered but had not put on the anticipated voice lessons list. Not all of the practices succeeded equally to fulfill my intended purpose to create a sense of deepening understanding in engaged meaning making (Smith, 1999) in the research circle.
Directing the shape and substance of the study

In December, after the first session at the face-to-face meeting in September and the four subsequent sessions on the wiki, I scanned across all of the texts looking for themes, images or motifs to produce a short document of “findings” for the teachers. This summary was posted on the wiki and the teachers were invited to comment—although none did. I offered this synopsis as a way of taking stock, in order to plot a direction for the remaining four sessions. At that point, I determined that what I needed to do was deepen some of the issues that had been addressed and, in one case, confront more directly the issue of voice since it had been skirted in the first four sessions but never addressed overtly.

In March after the last four writing sessions on the wiki, I took stock again in order to plan for the final face-to-face meeting in Yellowknife. At that point, I decided to bring only the three most active participants to the final face-to-face meeting. While I was grateful for the insights of all the participants and appreciated having a larger number of people available for the online workshops and live chats, I thought the final day would be most effective by including only the people who had a thorough understanding of all of the writing workshops. In this way, the invited participants would be familiar with one another’s writing and also the points of view that had been previously expressed. Thus, we could expand and develop ideas. In particular, I wanted to take up some of the more troubling ideas—those that were conflicted or lacking in clarity. What follows is my plan for the day:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Practice</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9:00</td>
<td>PowerPoint</td>
<td>Intro to the day’s session and then free write and brief discussion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:00</td>
<td>After the place slide turn recorder on</td>
<td>Present some of the findings’ slides and then keep recording comments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>Activity</td>
<td>Notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:15</td>
<td>Discussion</td>
<td>See morning questions below</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:15</td>
<td>Free write on <em>place</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:45-1:00</td>
<td>Lunch at a restaurant of choice</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:00</td>
<td>PowerPoint on <em>voice</em></td>
<td>Discuss findings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Handout on revision and discussion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:45</td>
<td>Analyze our writing for voice traits</td>
<td>Analysis questions below</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:30</td>
<td>End-of-day recorded discussion</td>
<td>See questions below</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What follows are the prompts for the morning discussion. The regular font indicates the question; the italicized font indicates my thinking behind the prompt.

1. How might aspects of the way you approach this instruction change in a different place, Edmonton for example? *This question was meant as a conversation starter. I didn’t think it was particularly challenging and, frankly, it was reminiscent of questions I used to ask former high school students about texts we had read or about their own writing with regard to setting.*

2. Does an understanding of place help provide that initial practice that generates writing? *I asked this because many spoke of the importance of “getting students started.”*

3. One of the things that I was unable to do was have us use talk as part of our process…what are the implications for talk before, during, and after writing? *In the half-day workshops at the February pilot, participants wrote and then shared orally, worked with a partner, extended what they had done through a specific oral exercise, questioned each other’s writing, or were given specific prompts for how they would elicit further writing for their partner. The oral aspect was missing from most of our work together during the actual study. I did not include writing*
practices that were oral at the September or April workshops because this was not something I could build on during the “voice lessons” on the wiki.

4. Can you say something about students’ out-of-school literacy practices in the place where you teach? Do you think students are fluent in these literacies? Do you see a role for these literacies in school? In various ways, the teachers had referenced new literacies but we had not broached the subject head on.

5. Several people spoke about student writers feeling that they don’t have much to draw on. Could you say something about this? I wondered what the teachers were thinking when they said this. Why they thought this was so would have implications for classroom practices.

6. Do you use metaphor in your instruction and if so, how? There was no mention of the use of metaphor in instruction in the study, but in the pilot study, this subject came up in two of the focus groups. In fact, one group was adamant that metaphor was extremely important in Indigenous contexts. I had relied extensively on metaphor in my teaching so I wondered whether the conversations had allowed this topic to appear or whether the three present members of the group did not use metaphor.

What follows are the questions I asked participants to consider as they examined their own writing. I printed off their posts from the wiki and gave each teacher a folder that contained their writing samples.

Afternoon voice traits questions:

1. Select a piece of prose and count the words in your sentences. What do you notice…What else can you notice about some of your sentences? I spent years, I’m afraid, writing comments like “Vary your sentence length” on my students’ writing. Not until the very end of my teaching did it occur to me that they couldn’t see what I saw in their writing. This exercise would be the first part of a series of exercises that would draw students’ attention to sentences. Among other things,
students notice that some published authors use the infamous sentence fragment in their writing. They are often astonished as they feel have been told over and over that a sentence fragment is not allowed. It takes some time for them to understand that one can use the syntactically taboo for effect.

2. Circle images in your writing. Underline word choices that you think are particularly good choices. What do you notice? An exercise like this is important for the discussion that follows regarding “good choices,” but in my experience, it also elicits the writers’ interest because of the focus on what they are doing in their writing. Years ago in my undergraduate studies, I had a friend who was working with a professor on a survey that was going to be administered to thousands of participants. One of the questions was something around the interest the respondent took in thinking about him or herself and the answer was used to predict the validity of the test. The test was predicated on the respondent’s ability to answer the questions honestly. My friend told me: “Basically, if a respondent says he or she doesn’t find him- or herself interesting, we toss the test out.”

3. How would you characterize the tone in several of your texts? This question allowed conversation around how students understand tone and mood but also the opportunity to think again about the relationship between orality and writing.

4. What can you say about your writing voice(s)? This discussion at the April workshop was very lively. The teachers noticed some interesting things about their own writing but also spontaneously shared observations about the others’ writing. This sharing could be the most important aspect of the practice but would need to be set up carefully in a classroom so that students would have some ability to be able to notice things in another persons’ writing. It may need to begin without the discussion in order to build up enough confidence and repertoire looking at one’s own writing. The teacher’s involvement with this initial phase would be crucial.
What follows are the questions for the last taped interview with the three participants. They are written here in the tense in which they were asked.

End of day discussion:

1. I have a concern about framing the students difficulty engaging with writing as a confidence issue (we have mentioned confidence as an issue in our conversations many times). It’s not so much that I think we are wrong not at all; I simply wanted to take the time to engage with a critical perspective. What if students don’t readily engage in writing for cultural reasons and by this I mean ethnicity, class, family cultures and perhaps we could add gender differences. What if the issue is not one of confidence at all? In general, I think that teaching is often pervaded by folk psychology theories. I do not doubt the importance of the psychological lens in the classroom nor do I doubt the importance of the confidence that was identified in the discussions as being crucial for students’ development as writers; I do fear, however, the individual bent of the psychological frame that overlooks or glosses over the political.

2. What do confident Northern student writers know that unconfident writers don’t? I asked this because I wanted to give some thought to what we might learn from our confident writers.

3. What motivates students who are interested in writing? I asked this because my study focused on the reluctant writers and yet all of the participants had hastened to add that they had some interested writers in their classrooms, too. I wanted to ensure that we had an opportunity to reflect on the experience of those students, as well.

4. What motivates the student who has a one-off amazing writing experience? I asked about the one-off experience, trusting that these teachers would have had an experience with a student who generally struggles with writing but one day writes something seemingly beyond the kinds of text
s/he usually produces. I wondered whether the participants thought the writing caught the student by surprise or whether there were conditions that could be identified.

5. Some participants spoke about students’ fear of being wrong or of appearing smart in front of others. Can you say more about this? These ideas also came up in the literature around working with Indigenous students (Alberta Teacher’s Association, 2004). Whether people have the opportunity to appear smart in front of one another is not necessary for learning but stems from cultural values around the way classroom learning is sometimes structured. To avoid cultural biases around the need to demonstrate intelligence in front of a group, we can draw from complexity theory which reminds us that intelligence is the capacity to anticipate the next learning move required for the group.

6. One of the February participants spoke about risk-taking, suggesting that this is a Western value for learning, not a Dene one. She suggested that in places where there is a concern about the scarcity of resources, risk-taking in learning is not wise but wasteful. What is your thinking? The participants in the Northernvoices study were less likely to point to sociocultural differences than the participants in the pilot study. I thought this question would not only allow a consideration of the comment expressed in February, but might also open the opportunity to discuss their own observances.

7. One of the participants cited a writer who spoke about the way that writing makes “lived experience accessible to the students, forcing them to resee.” Can you say more about this? Because so much of our conversations had focused on generative practices, I wanted to have some discussion about revision.

8. How much awareness do you think students need to have of what writing can do in order to feel motivated to write? Can they be tricked into it? What kinds of snags do they encounter in their writing? How do you support students who encounter a snag during writing? As teacher/writers,
the participants were far more aware of what writing can do than their students. I wanted them to reflect on the difference between their experience and their students’.

9. Would it make sense after an assignment such as copying a writer’s work (the assignment we did with Susan Aglukark, Jeannette Armstrong, Richard Wagamese, Sherman Alexie and Thomas King) to ask students “What did copying force them to pay attention to?” My sense of my own pedagogy is that I didn’t take the time to extend the possibilities in many of the assignments I asked my students to do.

10. Would it be helpful if we asked students to pretend to be the writers of an already created text, gave them part of the text and asked them to imagine the various ways the story could go and then support their reasoning? Could we ask them to do that with these kinds of generative practices? One of the difficulties I encountered with the writing workshop approach was that writing always had to be created from scratch. I thought practices that set the conditions so that students didn’t always have to think through all of the elements of narrative, exposition, argumentation and poetry each and every time, could be helpful.

11. Thinking back to the reflections and the MSN conversations, were there things you noticed or otherwise wanted us to discuss? After some faltering beginnings, the conversation turned into a lengthy dialogue about the importance of empathy in teaching.

At the end of the day, I expressed gratitude for the many thoughtful contributions the participants had made. Laurence suggested that a writers group might be fun as he had enjoyed the opportunity to write with others. Although the texts were not included in this research, I was impressed with the quality of writing of all the participants and enjoyed reading their submissions. I gave each of the present participants a litre of Ontario maple syrup and a $50.00 gift certificate to Indigo. Both were well received.
Data analysis: Reading the clouds

After the April workshop, I spent several months with the data. First, I coded the data for patterns and themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and kept that work in binder. Next, I took Jane Gallop’s conception of “close reading” approach in order to examine the data without focusing on what she calls “an idea behind the text.” To this end, she suggests a focus on things that stand out such as words that surprise, words that seem unnecessarily repeated, patterns in metaphors and images, as well as what is said in parentheses and footnotes. Focusing on the minor elements and not the main ideas, Gallop (2000) says, “is a technique to encourage the learner to see what we already don’t know.” Focusing on the details without trying to connect them to an overall picture, allows us to interrupt our projections. Gallop believes that this is an ethical type of reading that goes beyond a simple confirmation of our preconceptions of the main ideas in any given text. Finally, once I was familiar with the data coded for the main patterns and themes and coded for surprise words, images, metaphors and parenthetical phrases, I read a third unmarked copy “ecopoetically” (Bate, 2000) which I understood as a form of hermeneutic interpretation that uncovers that which is not immediately apparent. Bate’s uses ecopoetics to answer the question of how poetry might bring readers to the Heideggerian conception of dwelling. Bate says, “For Heidegger, poetry is the original admission of dwelling because it is a presencing not a representation, a form of being not of mapping” (p. 262). His version of ecopoetics is a reconceived Romanticism “a poesis (Greek ‘making’) of the oikos (Greek ‘home’ or dwelling place’)”. Ecopoetics affirms the sacredness of the more-than-human world and admittedly, this idea runs contrary to the hermeneutics of suspicion that is at the heart of postmodern literary theory. But Bate believes that ecopoetics can find a clearing. He draws from Ricoeur the conception that the world “is knowledge, history, memory, imagination…” which reminds me of Laurence’s assertion during a conversation at the last meeting in Yellowknife that the reader’s
experience of a book is also “lived experience.” While most books tell about the world, Bates claims, some poetic texts provide opportunities for the reader to open him- or herself to another person’s ‘project,’ to an alternative way of being in the world. As such, poetic works, and indeed other artistic works, he says, can be an “imaginary idea ecosystem” (p. 250) that we can inhabit in order to imagine living differently. Bate gets around the postmodern assertion that our home is in language by asserting that poetry has the power to speak the earth; thus, Ricoeur’s world is not only the world in our heads. Poetry can articulate the relationship between internal and external worlds, between being and dwelling. Ecopoetics provides an exploration between two ecologies: one in the mind and the other in the external environment.

My third reading of the data was an experiment in ecopoetics. I considered the data as an imaginary ecosystem that I could enter in order to construe how one might teach writing differently. Bate contrasts reading ecopoetically with readings that treat “their raw material as a ‘standing reserve’” (such as my approach in the first reading). For him, “[h]istories, theories, political systems are all enframings” (p. 268). Bates says that ecopoetic reading finds clearings, however brief they may be, for as soon as we reflect we interpret and dwelling is no longer possible. Like Caputo (1987), Bates reminds us that interpretation is all the way down. In the ecopoetic reading, I approached the texts meditatively in the spirit of thankfulness open to listening and open to the questions that might beg to be asked. It was at the end of this reading that I felt the data suggested the topics that needed to be addressed through further considieration. These topics emerged propelled by the conviction that Farmer Hoggett utters in Babe (Noonan, 1995), “Little ideas that tickle and nag and refuse to go away should never be ignored” (51:29 – 51:37).

After the ecopoetic reading, I arrived at four main ideas which are supported by the data. The first paper that examines the teachers’ intuitive use of complexity thinking draws mostly
from the data that was coded according to patterns and themes. The second paper which explores
the possibility that new literacies may represent an overlap between Indigenous and Western
pedagogies emerged from the Gallop close reading. The influence of the oral and visual traditions
on contemporary teaching practices in the NWT kept appearing but was never successfully dealt
with. In the second paper, I also draw from the patterns and themes coded in the pilot study data.
The third paper also emerged after the Gallop close reading: the term personal was used many
times but with many different denotations and connotations. The paper was an opportunity to
resolve the conflict that emerged out of the disparities around how we understood what was
“personal” in writing. The last paper on laying down the voice path while teaching writing is the
most ‘ecopoetic’ in that the data is no longer standing reserve, but the comments of the
participants are treated like theorists in the text I create.

However, there will always be more to say. The hermeneutic circle, as Pinar (1995),
assures, is not a method for uncovering meaning but rather a metaphorical way of conceptualizing
the process of understanding and the process of interpretation. The four papers that constitute my
data chapters are my thinking about the issues raised in this study…for now.

Validity for the reader: To make a meaning

The validity of my study is understood in terms of Wilson’s (2008) notion of relational
accountability, which arises from my understandings from the place that is Fort Simpson. In
relational accountability, Wilson (2008) argues that the goals of validity should be replaced by
credibility. Similarly, Gadamer (1981) reminds us that while there are many interpretations, and
though none are finite, some offer a better account that rings more "true." In order for readers to
decide if the account is believable there needs to be a recognizable sense of seemliness or sense
of appropriate character in the work. For Wilson, another requirement in relational accountability
is that the research should “reflect and build upon the relationships between the ideas and [the] participants” (p.101). The ideas of the participants in the Northernvoices project were nested within their places, and for me, within the ideas and “participants” of the places I knew during my 19 years in the North. Wilson argues that analysis must be “true to the voices of all the participants and reflect an understanding of the topic that is shared by researcher and participants alike” (p.101). He sees hermeneutics as a “good English word” to describe Indigenous epistemology. Because so much of Indigenous ways of being and thinking is based upon what he calls relational accountability, hermeneutics points to the importance of the interpretation of the context of knowledge that is necessary so that the knowledge can become a lived part of the web of relationships. My aim for using a hermeneutic approach in this research is to work with a framework that is a good fit for the place and ideas of the study, one that recognizes a multiplicity of perspectives that are interconnected, subjective, contextually bounded, and always partial (Slattery, Krasny, & O’Malley, 2006). This multiplicity of perspectives and partial knowing does not preclude all transferability to other contexts. I anticipate that the transferability will be judged by the potential within the research to suggest applications elsewhere. I concur with Gallagher (1992) that teaching emerges out of in interpretive process and have faith in other educators’ and educationalists’ abilities to identify what will work for themselves.

In Wilson’s (2008) idea of “relational accountability … we are accountable to ourselves, the community, our environment or cosmos as a whole, and also to the idea or topics that we are researching” (p. 106). Wilson sees four different ways in which Indigenous scholars put into practice being accountable to all our relations. The first is how the research topic is chosen, which must take into consideration its value to the community and whether the research is done with or on Indigenous people. The second is the methods used to collect data and build relationships. For Wilson, these methods could include non-empirical data that might come in a flash of insight or a
dream; the methods must include “deep listening” (p. 113) that leads to “meaningful exchanges” in interviews. The third is how the data is analyzed or, as Wilson phrases it, how we analyze what we are learning. According to Wilson, complex ideas require a lifetime of analysis. This corresponds to Apache conceptions of storying that were told to Basso (1996) and also to the kinds of comments I heard Dene elders make on this subject. Wilson’s approach becomes more ethnographic in this step as he recommends taking the work back to the participants for continuous feedback. Hermeneutics questions this strategy of returning to participants for validation because it is always impossible to reproduce the original meaning of the participants’ responses, but I asked the participants in the final workshop to review my interpretations as a way to ‘trouble’ my own narrowness of vision, interests, and focus. Recognizing that hermeneutics honors multiplicity of responses, this return of my interpretation to the participants was meant as a return to the generative nature of interpretation. The fourth is how relational accountability is maintained in the way the outcomes are presented. Wilson writes here about being accountable to oneself and not only to other people. For him, retaining one’s integrity involves writing from one’s voice about the stories that make personal meaning. The research should be grounded in place, but he reminds us that the researcher is a part of that place, too.

**We never get the better of the flux**

In conclusion, my findings will be consistent within the theoretical framework that I have laid out. Interpretations are referential and relational, not absolute. “True understanding is never unconditional, but always a matter of finding the right conditions under which understanding can take place….Understanding is always interpreting, and to interpret means to locate and acknowledge the relevant presuppositions” (Caputo, 2002). I will try to make clear to the reader how I arrived at my interpretations so s/he can judge the merits of my interpretation for
her/himself. Gadamer (2004) has suggested that “the harmony of all details with the whole is the criterion of correct understanding” (p. 291) and for me, Gadamer’s suggestion is in harmony with Wilson’s conception of relational accountability. Given that my study is about emplaced writing, I have tried to employ the concerns of the study in the writing of the dissertation itself. Throughout the study and the writing of the dissertation, I remind myself of the need to think of all aspects in terms of relationships to and with self, others, land and spirit. It is my hope that the intention to make these connections will set up the conditions in the dissertation for horizons of overlap between the representation of my experience and understandings and the readers’ interpretation.
Chapter 6
Find What Works and Run With It

“It is a case of finding what works and running with it.”

(Eric, 2009, live chat transcript)

The complex reality of educational involvement

The teachers in my research study were not new to teaching, and they were familiar with the prescribed mandates for the content and form of education in the NWT; indeed, they had been involved on various levels in designing or at the very least in providing input into the development and implementation of curriculum. The language of curriculum documents and board initiatives, such as “outcomes,” “SMART writing,” and “performance tasks,” did creep into our conversations, but most often the teachers spoke of educational involvement in terms other than those prescribed by institutions. Education is irreducible to controlled activities within linear, reductionist conceptions of teaching and learning (Jardine, 1992). In many instances during the project, teachers spoke in their own words about the movement that Gallagher identifies as the way of teaching. Experienced teachers may be more comfortable with education construed as “a movement that transcends the complete control of those involved, while still requiring their participation” (Gallagher, p. 180).

Educational involvement means that the teacher and students are in a hermeneutical situation, rather than in what Dewey (1986/1916) would call a “problematic situation,” and it means entering into “the way of the movement of this process” (p. 181). Laurence, one of the participants, spoke of it this way: “I find we have to have a plethora of strategies and accept that what works one day may not work the next. The best teaching strategy is to plan like crazy and then be ready to change. It is also important to remember that the kids feed off each other.”
Margaret, another participant, said teachers need “thorough planning and a willingness to throw it out when the class takes us where it really needs to be” but admitted how hard she finds it to let go of her plans, especially after she has invested many hours in them. Some of the teachers prepare responses for their own assignments, so in addition to preparing the lessons they arrive in class with at least one example and sometimes two to illustrate that there are many ways to approach the task. Some of the teachers also noted that they felt disheartened when they planned extensively and too few students (one example of “too few” was 3 out of 20) came to class to make trying that assignment viable. In this case, too, the teachers dropped what they had planned and went with something else but admitted to feeling some resentment because they had been looking forward to teaching the lesson.

**The teachers’ intuitive recognition of complexity thinking**

John St. Julien (2005) characterizes education as “a recursive, open system characterized by emerging entities, the evolution of new capacities, and by developmental growth” (p.100); his work situates the views expressed by many of the teachers in the study within a complexity thinking framework. St. Julien contends that an experienced teacher knows how to shift “methods, content and even the lesson’s very purpose with the time of day, or the day of the week, or the mood of the students” by making “sense of the poetics of the classroom” (p100). As Davis and Sumara (2006) put it, teachers consider phenomena that arise in many interactions of the actions of which are enabled and constrained by the dynamics of contexts across the levels of “[b]rains, social collectives, [and] bodies of knowledge” that can become “broader, more nuanced, capable of more diverse possibilities” (p. xi).

Complexity thinking is not an explanatory system (Davis & Sumara, 2006); it offers possibility for teachers’ sense-making which is understood as “a disciplined, open-minded,
evidence based attitude toward the production of new, more useful interpretive possibilities” (p. 26). What concerns teachers working on the fly in the classroom is not validity but viability, not generalizability but relevancy, not optimality but adequacy. For teachers it is always impossible to divorce the knower from the known. Teachers recognize the partiality of their knowledge but know that despite the constraints on their thinking, generalizations must be made and interpretations must be rendered in order to make sense of human experience and then act on that sense-making. But teachers also recognize that in spite of necessary reductions and compressions of judgments, generalizations and interpretations, possibilities nonetheless remain. But possibilities remain for openness given that people can transcend their own limitations through their participation in the collective intelligence of a group. The teacher’s role as the one who triggers and points to possibilities is not that of the guide-on-the-side or facilitator in a student-centered class—as I believed in the first years of my practice in Fort Simpson. Teachers act as the sentinel for the learning systems. Even as they are as implicated in the learning as are the learners whose individual and collective attention they attempt to focus, teachers are charged with the responsibility to pay closer attention than anyone else in the group.

Laurence’s comment, “It is also important to remember that the kids feed off each other” reminds us that teachers are never in control of the learning that occurs. This thought runs contrary to the assumptions of nervous new teachers and rationalist policymakers who hope that the knowledge of inputs will lead to predictable outputs, but complexity thinking tells us that classroom groupings are self-organizing and adaptive systems and no one can ever completely determine outcomes. Davis and Sumara (2006) remind us that members of a classroom grouping engage very quickly in establishing group norms, jostle about for social positioning and otherwise work to inscribe a collective identity. I was reminded of this when I first moved to Yellowknife. After so many years in Fort Simpson, I was fairly certain of student appreciation for my sense of
humor whereas in Yellowknife I had a class of Grade 9s who always glanced at the class comedian to see his reaction. If he laughed, laughter was sanctioned. Sometimes the class comedian found me funny; sometimes our rivalry meant no laughing allowed.

In Fort Simpson even a fuddy-duddy teacher (because I was only young and ‘with it’ at the beginning of my teaching!) was allowed to make people laugh. The test was whether the teacher could tell a good joke or story. With a good joke or even a choice smart-alec comment even the toughest combatant could be defeated. One time, in the middle of class, I had a young man announce: “You can’t control me. If I wanted to, I could jump out that window and there would be nothing you could do to stop me.”

I retorted, “You’re 16. Feel free to use the front door.”

The class gasped and one young woman said: “Hey! You’re supposed to encourage us to stay in school!” And then we all laughed, including the would-be window jumper.

There is always a social collective in a classroom whether or not the teacher works with it or tries to shut it down through mechanisms that control the knowledge that is produced. In complexity thinking, “the question is whether or not [the condition of decentralized control] can be meaningfully brought to bear on the development of concepts and interpretive possibilities” (Davis and Sumara, 2006, p. 147). Any teacher may sometimes fear the ‘feeding off each other’ that can create a collective whose focus is no longer under her control, but complexity thinking reminds us that there is tremendous possibility in this coming together of a collective. The impact of a successful collective can be that all participants are “capable of actions, interpretations, and conclusions that they wouldn’t typically achieve on their own” (Davis, Sumara, & Luce-Kapler, 2008, p. 192). But this coming together for learning can be challenging and frightening for teachers given that prescriptive rules about what should or must be done do not guarantee the success of the learning collective. Rather, complexity thinking recognizes that “[t]he rules that
define complex systems maintain a delicate balance between sufficient structure to limit a pool of virtually limitless possibilities, and sufficient openness to allow for flexible and varied responses” (p. 193).

**Teachers conceptualizing enabling constraints**

Although they didn’t use the terminology from complexity thinking, many of the teachers spoke frequently about “enabling constraints” which are the types of expansive questions and assignments that support both individual and collective learning (Davis, Sumara, & Luce-Kapler, 2008). Such questions and assignments do not presume correct responses reached through clearly delineated techniques but rather create the balance between constraints that restrict decisions and enough openness perhaps through unpredictable combinations or juxtapositions or extensions. The goal, in creating enabling constraints for learning contexts, is not to reproduce existing understanding, knowledge, or understanding but to explore established knowledge while creating knowledge. Tom described his construction of enabling constraints as setting “guidelines” to help students “focus.” Dave, Eric, and Tom made it clear in one of our conversations that this did not mean that they set “a ‘have to’ as in the length of paragraphs” but instead proscribed unacceptable action for their writing practices. Proscribing unacceptable action sets the conditions for the coherence that is group identification but also opens up the space for randomness (Davis & Sumara, 2006). The prompts I set for the writing practices called “Voice lessons” were themselves intended as enabling constraints for the shared project that was focused on thinking about writing practices that are effective in Northern communities, so it is not surprising that prompts or other parameters for writing practices in the classroom were often discussed.

After the first writing workshop, Tom, one of the participants in the *Northernvoices* study, commented on his struggle with the constraints of the workshop’s time limit and noted that
he “felt some empathy with his students as a result.” As other teachers faced their own struggles with the time constraints, they reflected upon the elements that they take into consideration in order to set time constraints for their students. Tom said: “It is a difficult thing to attempt to give ample time but not too much to your students.” Liz said that time constraints needed to “get us beyond the laborious belaboring of things” but at the same time not be “too anxiety provoking to be helpful.” While not every student will need the same amount of time, teachers and their students are working within the long-standing way of thinking about time in an established institution. In another conversation, the teachers deliberated over giving their students prompts before the class. From their experiences as writers within the writing workshops they had found it very helpful to consider the prompt on the wiki and then mull over possibilities before writing; in the end, the teachers thought this would not be possible because some students might do the assignment ahead of time and arrive with nothing to do in class. In that case, the teachers felt most of their students wouldn’t accept doing anything “more” than what anyone else was doing, so they would not be able to provide the student with a new assignment; nor did they feel that students would be willing to work on unfinished assignments from other classes. The managerial aspects of an institution where as many as 30 people (albeit rarely this number in any but the larger communities in the NWT) sit at desks in the same room at the same time requires that everyone be actively engaged in ‘school work.’ That individuals might complete the assignment and feel finished with it and thereby not engage in activities that the teacher imagined to extend the learning was also mentioned as problematic. Teachers also grappled with what offering the prompt ahead of time might mean in their contexts where they faced irregular student attendance which already meant they were monitoring and keeping track of bits and pieces of several assignments begun and abandoned.
Teachers thinking about what encourages writing

In addition to getting the time constraints right and working within the way time is construed in schools, teachers noted the importance of getting the prompt right. The teachers spoke about the importance of using prompts in their writing pedagogy to get their students to start writing which they identified as a struggle for many of their students. Eric suggested that “anything too open-ended causes confusion” and “anything too long will fizzle out of the gate.” The possibilities for what might be “too long” were taken up in other sessions: too long might mean that the duration of time required to complete the assignment is too much or that there are too many implied steps in the prompt. Eric spoke of his experience of the freedom in the writing prompts which allowed as “a crazy tangent.” Dave recognized how much he appreciated the “lack of constraint” in the workshop, reflecting that it allowed him “more freedom to write than he sometimes offered [his] own students.” Annette spoke about an assignment that prompted her students to write descriptively. One student was moved to write about a grandparent who had recently passed away. Annette reflected: “I think that if I told her to write a descriptive paragraph about someone important to you it would have taken away her creativity.” The assignment created the space for the student to write very well about a topic that was very important to her.

In our writing workshops, I pointed to the way that Laurence felt free to ignore aspects of the prompt that didn’t work for him, or to elaborate and extend on an aspect that did, or to bring another element altogether to the prompt. In all cases, his work remained within the bounds of what the group was exploring, so it was not that he was a maverick, determined to ‘do his own thing’ but rather he seemed to know how to change and bend the prompt to enable his own writing. In an MSN session, we discussed whether students can identify when the constraints are too restrictive, but most participants felt that students did not do this (with the exception of a very confident few). I contend that the point of the work of the classroom is not so much that everyone
follows the rules so that everyone does the same thing but that everyone participates in a joint project. The point of a joint project is learning at the level of individual and collective systems (Davis et al., 2008). Over the years, I taught a few ‘maverick’ students, who assumed that I and members of the class just didn’t “get” their writing positioning themselves outside of the collective. While they may have been doing what they felt they needed to do for themselves at the time they were unlike Laurence who participated actively in our group and was open to suggestions to reconsider his work. Additionally, he offered comments on the writing of others.

**Running with the importance of structure**

Many teachers spoke about the importance of structure in their practices, but when asked to say more about what they meant, it became evident that not all teachers meant the same thing. This is in keeping with Davis and Sumara’s (2006) observation that the word ‘structure’ is “subject to diverse, even flatly contradictory interpretation” (p. 13). They point to the word’s prominent usage in both architecture and biology. When structure is associated with buildings, in the classroom it might mean “fixed organization, preplanning, and step following” which connote conceptions of learning grounded by foundations supported by scaffolds and substantiated by the basics. When structure is associated with biology, like a salt crystal for example, in the classroom it might mean that that the teacher may anticipate what is likely to unfold but will recognize that despite general traits shared in common with other living systems, vital aspects are not and can never be replicated precisely. The teacher who subscribes to the importance of structure as buildings can perfect her unit on *The Lord of the Flies*, year after year. The teacher who subscribes to the notion of structure as biology will develop an expansive repertoire of possible practices to get at the concepts, skills and perspectives she hopes to point to in the study of a novel like *The Lord of the Flies*. Some of the teachers in the study did speak of structure as step
by step, routinized practices but they also spoke of structure as recursive expansiveness. Some of the teachers in this study recognized the structure-determined nature of their students and their classes and endeavored to respond to embodied understandings across learning systems.

**Running with support for individual student writers**

“Besides my academic students, my students are below grade level in their literacy skills, Eric said in one session. “It’s tough to be passionate about something you struggle at. How I would love to say that I instill passion, but I can’t. It is a case of finding what works and running with it.” One element that was common across the teachers’ talk was the idea of supports for the writer. While all teachers pointed to the importance of presenting clearly defined instructions and immediate feedback for any writing tasks, activities, or practices—which is supported in the research by Emig, 1977; Keh, 1990; Smith and Wilhelm, 2006; Allington, (2007); and Milner, Milner, & Mitchell, 2012—teachers also indicated the ways they enabled writing to continue during the process. For example, in order to understand the choices that are available when students are writing, or to gain control over writing as Dean (2006) phrases it, students need to have procedural knowledge of how to do something. Teachers spoke about the supports they had put in place to assist students in their ability to remember, draw on, augment, or reassure themselves about their procedural knowledge of writing. Annette spoke at length about the way she used her bulletin boards as sources for procedural know-how for her students: her boards were laden with how-to guides and previous students’ samples of various genres and forms. These guides and samples served as inspiration or as sources of additional information or phrasing or syntactic structure for students throughout their writing.

Many teachers felt they needed to support students who were not confident writers through ongoing suggestions and questions that drew possibilities out of these novice writers.
They often spoke about “sitting down beside” these writers to elicit responses that might allow the writing to continue. Annette had a jar of suggestions that could be plucked to enable writing and Eric and some of the teachers in the pilot study mentioned that they had visual prompts that students could select.

**Running with shared experiences**

Annette, who felt she was not a particularly confident writer herself, identified that one of her strategies to enable writing was to encourage students to consider previous units of study, lessons and projects as grist for the writing mill. Writing was not necessarily the cumulative assignment at the end of a unit. Often this teacher taught her intermediate students for two consecutive years, so she encouraged students to think of previous learning experiences as valuable sources to mine for writing, regardless of their current units of study.

Teachers also identified talking in pairs or small groups as central to their strategies for increasing competencies. Even when students were asked to write individually, teachers more often than not saw the need to set the conditions for sharing the writing with at least one other student to generate or refine and revise ideas. In these classes, writing was rarely the mop-up activity that prompted Emig (1971), Somers (1980) Graves, (1983) to reconsider writing pedagogy in the ’70s and ’80s, ushering in the process movement in writing pedagogy and emphasizing the importance of activities such as peer conferencing. Vygotsky (1978) argued that when we share ideas we learn by combining our understanding with others. While the teachers set the conditions for the talk, for example, generating ideas before and during writing or extending and challenging ideas during the writing, they noted that they had not done as much as they might have with small group discussion after the writing task was complete. In an MSN discussion, this possibility was seen as a potential opportunity for developing writing competencies because, as
Eric put it, “the metacognitive debrief afterward about the process might allow the individual student to develop more confidence in his or her ability to go it alone.”

**Running with collaborative writing projects**

The collaboration in writing also included whole class writing supported in research by practitioner researcher like Regie Routman (2005). For example, Annette approaches teaching the five-paragraph essay with her intermediate students as a collaborative exercise. Together, they identify the center of gravity for their collective essay and determine a basic outline for the paragraphs; then, they work in groups on the introductory and body paragraphs. Annette word processes their work that evening and the next day she projects their work on a screen and they all work together to mine the paragraphs to create a coherent essay and finally to formulate a conclusion. As I understood her, the assignment concludes at this point. I wondered whether there might be possibilities for extension, especially since revision was identified by all teachers as difficult for students. It seems to me that the students might have less at stake personally in this collective essay and that conditions could be established that would encourage the students to further revise and then edit the essay. On the other hand, perhaps they were finished with it, and Annette had taken the exercise as far as she could.

In other classrooms, sometimes this collaboration does not occur at the whole class level, but rather, smaller groups write collaboratively; this collaboration in some cases involve writing on a class wiki. Many of the teachers in this study concur with research (Myers, 2006; Swenson, 2006; Leu, Byrne, Zawlinksi, McVerry, & Everett-Caopardo, 2009) that stresses the idea that Information Communications Technology (ICT) has a place in the English Language Arts classroom. The teachers asked students to create collaborative stories or research with embedded
links, photos and YouTube clips on the wiki. Eric made use of the archival footage on Google docs and also asked his students to read blogs pertinent to their studies.

An example from a classroom where there is little access to computers indicates how easily and effectively collaborative practices can be employed even without ICT. Laurence provides a handout of instructions to groups of five students. Each student follows the prompt for the “original author” who think through a piece of writing but write only the first paragraph. After the original author has written, the work is passed on to the four other writers who follow write a paragraph or so in response to the text and to four further prompts provided on the handout. This story is returned to the original author to make changes to enhance coherence and to consider before discussing with the others in the group how the story diverged from the author’s intention. Laurence was clear that authorial intention was what he wanted students to explore by playing with the decision-making possibilities that are set up as one writes.

After reading Wilhelm and Smith (2002) as a classroom teacher in 2003, I designed an assignment based independent inquiry into literature for my Grade 11 students. I asked students to select three books that they felt answered a question of their own choosing. The questions ranged, for example, from examining the craft of writing such as the use of the first person in young adult fiction, to thinking about what one might learn about a mind that is autistic, to exploring how an author’s political beliefs might wend their way through his or her fiction, and to investigating whether there is any scientific basis in the technology presented in science fiction texts. Students presented their findings in an I-Search report created by Steven Macrorie (1988) that asks students to document their own process as part of the report into their self-selected inquiry. Additional assignments in other courses over the years included a unit on original research for Grade 9 students and site-specific papier maché sculptures in various venues in Fort Simpson for a Grade 10 art class.
All of these inquiries pointed to the possibilities for projects that were collaborative, but more importantly, I think, were shared learning projects. The learning that individuals undertook demonstrated that they could ask questions and make connections and ultimately represent their understanding. The degree of individual competence expressed in the final projects for these inquiries would be impressive enough even without considering the transphenomenal learning that occurred across many levels. Many of the students interacted with community and family members, with texts other than the classroom or school library sets, with internet sites and with locations in the community. All of these interactions allowed for a networking system of complex “neighbours” that are “ideas, hunches, queries, images, artifacts, and other manners of representation” (Davis, Sumara, & Luce-Kapler, 2008, p. 198). The inquiries, like some of the writing practices generated by the teachers, allowed ideas to bump up against one another in the hope that juxtaposition might trigger other interpretations, which might trigger others and so on. I mention these inquiries from my former classroom practice to point to the idea that collaboration is not necessarily accomplished simply by putting groups of people together to talk (Davis et al., 2008). While complexity thinking offers little direct advice on how to set the conditions for the meeting and blending of ideas, experienced teachers learn how to enter into the place-aware consciousness that allows them to most effectively work within their educational circumstances.

**Running with the far-from-equilibrium**

Complexity thinking challenges the notions of analytical science that dynamic systems tend toward equilibrium and therefore must be governed by negative feedback mechanisms that hold possible activities within acceptable ranges. In complexity thinking, positive feedback is required so that small perturbations can keep the system vital. Teachers in the study worked with what I referred to as the ‘givens’ of some behaviors within their school context. This does not
mean that the teachers resigned themselves to ‘givens’ as though they were forever permanent; it does mean, however, that they did not privilege straightening out those ‘recalcitrant’ behaviors over prompting learning within a collective that included these behaviors. Attendance, for example, is often cited as a significant problem for many Northern schools, so irregular attendance particularly at some times of the year such as the warm days of May and June after a long, cold winter and even on some days of the week such as a Monday after a weekend that has included parties in many households may be ‘givens’ in northern communities. Many teachers felt that their assignments were often “self-contained,” to use Eric’s word, as a response to these kinds of irregular attendance patterns. They also felt it was important to develop strategies to keep the class vibrant and the rhythm of learning moving as they felt their students were prone to “shut down.” Teachers felt they needed to bypass anticipated resistance.

**Running with “self-contained” writing assignments**

The teachers who worked in smaller communities or in non-academic classes in the regional centers and the capital city where attendance was most problematic, felt that most of their assignments were self-contained. Upon later prompting this did not mean that assignments were done once and never referred to again but assignments did not build on one another in case an activity started in class on Monday would leave the student who came to school on Wednesday unable to participate in the learning project. They lamented that they needed to engage students in writing this way more often than they would have liked, but as attendance was “choppy,” as defined by Eric, it was foolhardy to think of a series or set of practices that the group would be moving through on consecutive days. In my own practice, I often thought of the way that assignments might ‘talk’ to one another so that there was always a non-linear relationship between the assignments. Assignments might be contrasted or juxtaposed or might extend or
challenge something that we had been examining. Students might enter into this conversation at various points, although I did feel that the most benefit would come to those who had explored all of the relationships. Admittedly, however, there was a limit to how many absences a person might have in my class for these relational practices to make meaning; at times, I felt defeated by the sudden reappearance of someone whom I hadn’t seen for a while and resorted simply to finding the student something to do for that class.

Problems occurred with assignments that did not finish within the amount of time I thought they might so that they carried over into the next day. In the cases where teachers felt compelled to do too many “one-off” assignments, not only for individuals but for their whole class, they expressed concern for the learning of their regular attenders because they would have liked to see those students take on more sustained projects than they felt the dynamic of attendance patterns allowed. The teachers implied that the collective as a learning system required practices that they sometimes feared might be at odds with the needs of some individual learners. Teachers had a variety of strategies for enriching the needs of these students, however, including one-on-one attention, extracurricular clubs and individualized assignments. Teachers nonetheless expressed regret that some of their more competent writers were “left to their own devices,” as Margaret put it, when there were too few other learners to work with them at their capacity. In this case, teachers speculated about the possibilities for collaboration with other students throughout the NWT through electronic technology.

Teachers did identity the five-paragraph essay as one of the assignments they still embarked upon that did not follow this “self-contained” rule. For Tom, a five-paragraph essay begins during one week with thinking about a topic and related ideas; no writing is done and other activities continue in the class. The following week is devoted to writing the essay beginning with prewriting activities and drafting and rewriting, with the assignment due the
following Monday. By no means are all of the assignments submitted that Monday in this classroom so the teacher continues to work on the essay with the students who still have not completed it as time permits during the next unit of study. In addition to the essay, teachers embarked upon other assignments that took longer than one class, such as photostory or PowerPoint presentations. The participants indicated that they weighed the value of having the students work through these time-consuming assignments against the value of multiple other practices they might take up during that time. When prompted to understand the teachers’ reasoning for the ongoing privileging of the five-paragraph essay teachers identified its value in that students would need to write one for the general level (called applied or college level in other contexts) Grade 12 Alberta Diploma Examination. Although there is the possibility to write in other forms, teachers felt that this form was the most efficacious for the 70-minute maximum time that students were allotted for their “personal response to literature.” They felt that their students were often pressed for time in the written component of the exam and that the decision-making involved in structuring their content in an alternative form would leave them without enough time to complete the other two sections in the two-and-a-half hour exam. For the academic level students (who also write a Diploma exam that includes both a personal response and a critical response to a piece of literature), the ability to write a five-paragraph essay with ease was seen as a necessary for those going on to university.

So what might the “self-contained” writing projects entail? The students of the teachers in this study are asked to write responses to texts, the standard fare of many English classrooms and in many classes, journal writing was also a daily occurrence. The students also did free writing practices (sometimes called rapid or quick writes by participants in the study) without a prompt or focused free writing from a prompt. Teachers identified the ability of quick, generative free writing to move their students into writing. Elbow (2000) encourages this type of writing-
without-stopping in order to for the student writer to learn to trust that s/he has something to say and to enjoy the writing adventure. As getting started was identified as one of the difficulties for engaging students in writing, free writing can be very helpful because it doesn’t allow students to linger too long over, “I don’t know what to write about” or “I have nothing to write about,” as Tom asserted. The importance of play in these quick writes was also recognized. One of the participants in the February pilot said: “I had a lot of fun doing this [the free writing practice] but one of the reasons I had a lot of fun doing this was because it was low stakes. I didn’t have time to agonize over it even though I was sharing it with people who are literate and very well read. So that was an interesting lesson for me…to do some quick writes, to get some stuff out—to play with writing more in class rather than always be so serious.”

Other self-contained practices, both individual and collaborative, asked students to combine visual and written texts in, for example, PowerPoints, web pages, Comic Life, etc. as digital writing is generally well received by Northern students. Some of the participants had their students keep writing portfolios so the writing practices they encouraged might also extend, revise or develop ideas within previous writing. While some of the quick writing from prompt was meant to serve as a preface for a larger writing task, the purpose for many of the writing practices was thinking through something or discovering something the students didn’t realize they knew or understanding or clarifying an idea. Teachers used their writing practices to direct their students’ attention toward a concept or understanding that they wanted students to notice and consider. Laurence spoke directly about how he used writing practices “to get at” something else, while other participants implied that this is often their intention when they create writing practices.
Running in anticipation of student “shut down”

For many teachers the ideal situation for writing is “developing in students a desire to explore,” but again teachers worked within the realities of their situations, which meant that they sometimes encountered resistance in their classes. Dave, who said that he had quite a number of reluctant writers, acknowledged that he tried to “motivate them all differently…sometimes [what he does] totally works for some and sometimes it doesn’t work for others.” The possibility of teaching is “to stimulate learning through intentional disturbances” (Rasmussen, 2006, p. 231). For three researchers, (Bateson 1991, Humberto, Maturano & Varela 1987) cognition is a self-regulating system governed by thresholds that shift and change: it is not the state that governs the system, but the change. Skills can be acquired through the acquisition of knowledge but not all learning is about skill. Understanding, for example, the significant “outcome” of the learning that the teachers were trying to bring to bear in their classrooms does not increase as a result of repetition the way a skill might. Eric suggested that he has some students who will not or cannot write without his being “beside them giving suggestions and prompts.” In another suggestion he said: “Students, especially the weaker ones, like a very strong starting-off point…with the freedom to make it their own.”

Many teachers mentioned how quickly their students “shut down” (Tom’s term) if they thought they were doing something wrong or if they thought the task was beyond them. It seems that teachers anticipate the possibility that students might “shut down” during a writing activity and tried to create writing practices that might not allow this to happen. Beyond their concern for the individual, one of the teachers in the pilot project talked about how too much individual shutdown shuts down the class. Some of the practices to bypass the possibility of shut down included building upon the familiar even as the familiar (such as a previous unit of study) might be used in different ways and for different purposes. Annette was particularly adept at asking her
students to use the shared knowledge produced in the classroom as repertoire for writing assignments. Many teachers spoke about the teacher “taking the lead” either by creating a text for or with the group, by working out a group brainstorm or otherwise making the task at hand seem doable. Teachers also spoke about using language in their instructions and explanations that would not turn students off.

Dave and Eric both spoke about not using the term “argument” for that particular genre of writing but instead setting the conditions for the writing that would inevitably lead to that genre. They could talk about what was required in the form later. Both had previous experience with students who had been turned off by the term and speculated that they thought “argument” signified a form of writing that was too hard. Many teachers spoke about the difficulty they had engaging students in this form. Tom felt that his students “love arguing, orally that is, but the trouble is getting them to use that sense of wanting to win a battle down on paper with the same care and consideration.” Others felt that some students were unaccustomed to exercising analytical skills outside of the privacy of their own heads and were resistant to being asked to do this in public in either oral or written modes.

Two teachers identified some of their students’ weak writing skills as one possible reason for shut down, as weak writers may be dealing with a deluge of choices. As Dave suggested, when few of the writing skills come automatically, a writing task can impose a huge number of processes. This awareness may limit their ability to respond to writing choices in that they perceive themselves as incapable. In general, teachers felt that their less confident student writers shut down when they encountered difficulty – the trick according to Eric was not to let the student process the “I can’t deal with this” feeling before it was too late. Teachers moved quickly to redirect attention towards possibility whenever they could.
In addition to the fear of failure and the lack of confidence that the above discussion on shut down has implied, teachers also identified their students’ fear of appearing too smart. When one student does know how to respond he or she may choose not to and by doing so inhibit the group’s opportunity to learn. At the same time, the student’s refusal to shame others by pointing out what they don’t know, maintains social cohesion. Sometimes when I was teaching in the NWT, I wondered how to get at what the group might know in a way that is socially acceptable because I suspected that there were students whose knowledge or perceptions might have shifted the balance of our understanding but were instead contributing to a sense of communal not-knowing that foreclosed learning opportunities. Dave also identified a generalized malaise in some of his classes that he saw as coming from a variety of historical and present lived social conditions which may be only indirectly related to the writing task at hand but may make some students unlikely to respond positively, at least initially.

**Theorizing writing pedagogy within a complex reality**

Complexity thinking compels an acknowledgement that an individual learner, a classroom, a disciplinary domain, and a culture are four among many qualitatively different systems. Some of the teachers’ talk, as mentioned in previous sections in this paper, points to the many learning levels for which a teacher takes responsibility. The need to answer to government standards and parental desire for attainment is indicated through the talk of teaching practices related to the diploma exam, for example. At the same time as the teachers were worried about what normative assessment practices would mean for their students, they struggled with what they saw as student resistance to practices that would help them reach those standard norms.

Many teachers in this study and the pilot study were concerned about the adverse relationship between the practice of assigning grades to writing and the desire to engage students
in writing for the sake of learning. In the pilot project, the participant who had fun because it was “low stakes” also indentified marks attached to writing as something that makes writing ‘high stakes.” Margaret said: “While there are some students who won’t do something unless it will count, I’ve found more who will write when they don’t have the issue of a grade hanging over their heads.” Teachers may have felt caught between the requirements to report on student achievement and the long-standing reliance on writing as the primary mode for evaluating. In her teaching, Margaret was able to move from less “summative” evaluative practices to more “formative” practices; the conversation moved on before I could ask Margaret about directives for assessment from her board since boards often dictate the approach to assessment.

In the locality where Dave teaches, he was surprised by his students’ response to being evaluated: “Often my students aren’t motivated by the grade itself, which I found a bit alarming when I moved here years ago, given my past experiences down South. Overall, [getting students engaged] has to be something the kids will buy into, and this often involves choice.” Tom responded: “I think it is important for teachers to read everything that students write even if they are not necessarily evaluating it. Sometimes students write their most brilliant pieces when we least expect it!”

Another aspect of writing where the various tensions over marks converged was revision. It seems teachers saw a dual function in asking students to revise their written work. Revising improves work that is submitted for grades so it is worth the effort; but revising is also a worthwhile process in its own right. “I think that their first draft is their only draft…it’s on paper so it’s done,” said Eric. Cain (2009) who teaches creative writing at the university level also encounters resistance to revision. She declared that her students see their work as impenetrable when a draft is completed and contends that it is difficult for them to consider what is missing
from their text. She helps them with this process by asking them to insert new ideas, phrases and words into a published author’s text.

A teacher in the pilot study spoke about how unlikely she felt some students whom she suspected had fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD) “are going to be able to make the revision process work because for them when it’s done it’s done.” There are, of course, always exceptions to this as I am thinking of a boy whom I taught in Yellowknife whose adoptive parents had had him tested medically and he was diagnosed as having FASD, a disorder that manifests as a number of difficulties, primarily lower cognitive functioning, due to prenatal exposure to alcohol. The boy had attended a small private elementary school in Yellowknife designed especially for children who were living with FASD. When I taught him in a locally developed (sometimes called basic level in other contexts) high school class, he was not averse to revising and did not think that his first draft was his last.

Many teachers in both studies mentioned their endeavors to get students to return to their work but maintained that students indicated that their submission was “good enough.” Teachers spoke about what they saw as the influence of marks on this behavior; some suspected that the students anticipated a “good enough” grade if the grade one aims for is a pass, especially if most of the other members of the class are also aiming just for a passing mark. In this case, it would seem that the practice of submitting first drafts as finals is “good enough,” and they lamented what they saw as the overemphasis on grades that the school system has inculcated in the students such that the effort put into assignments is calculated. For the teachers, the writing was not sufficient or adequate because the students hadn’t explored the possibilities for revision, which they saw as an opportunity to step back from a text to see it from a new perspective.
The best practices of complexivist teachers

To attempt to create a list of ‘best practices’ for teaching in Northern classrooms based on isolated knowledge within one level of networked learning systems simply is not possible. My understanding arose out of exchanging ideas with the teachers and points to the importance of passionate involvement as opposed to dispassionate observation in writing pedagogy. On one of the written responses to writing on the wiki, Laurence posted this idea: “In order to foster a creative spirit and a confident voice, teachers must have patience, empathy and provide good instruction; and besides providing rigorous feedback, we must find the balance between affirming their efforts and criticizing their work.”

What we require to enter effectively into teaching writing is a mind-set for “drawing our attention to the presence of various kinds of connections” (Stanley, 2008, p. 134). The desire to understand how to best lead the individual learners, the classroom and the production of knowledge that is one’s discipline is the story of running in the educational experience without a finish line. Writing pedagogy for these experienced Northern teachers, as described and discussed in our conversations, is more akin to Doll’s (2008) urge for a “lively, creative, imaginative, chaotic, and complex” method that moves beyond “the rigidity of modernism’s scientific rationality so as to include the power of the historically storied and the generative creativity of the spiritful” (p. 47).

I want to end by reiterating Eric’s metaphor of “finding what works and running with it.” Teachers theorize as they go “in the existential moment and as the experience, with communal help, plunges into a situation, a matrix of connections (rich, recursive, relational, and rigorous) emerges” (Doll, 2008, p. 55). Instead of collapsing possibilities across a finish line, the point of running with their theory of writing pedagogy is to deliberately open them up.
Chapter 7
Troubling the Troubled water: Looking for Overlaps between Indigenous Pedagogies and Western Writing Pedagogies

One cannot talk about education in Northern places without speaking to the particular concerns of teaching Indigenous students within a Western education system. The Dene, Métis, Inuvialuit, and Inuit students of the NWT have lower rates of achievement than their non-Indigenous classmates (Northwest Territories Education, Culture and Employment, 2011) and higher rates of early school leaving. There are still fundamental disconnections between Indigenous students’ intellectual, spiritual, physical, and emotional selves and the very system meant to educate them (Cherubini et al., 2009). I concur with Bouvier & Karlenzig (2006) that education that values Indigenous ways of being as well as non-Indigenous, is of benefit to all Northerners, not only the Dene, Métis Inuvialuit, and Inuit students as the rich possibilities in the Indigenous curriculum present possibilities for meaning-making that is invaluable. But after 19 years of trying to enact this belief, I know that it is easier said than done. Infusing Indigenous perspectives into the content of my courses was doable, but it was more challenging to think of alternative ways to deliver that content.

In this chapter, I consider what the teachers had to say about their students’ facility with visual and oral modes and speculate that new literacies may provide a greater possibility for overlap between Indigenous and Western pedagogies than print-centric literacies do. The capacity to ignite students’ interest and engagement with writing may be inherent in the teachers’ capacities to compose digital writing practices.
Looking for Atleo’s overlap

In the February pilot, one of the participants, a non-Dene teacher of more than 20 years experience, who was born and raised in NWT, was concerned that finding an overlap between Indigenous and Western pedagogies is very difficult. She felt that, although our Northern educational rhetoric is committed to maintaining the cultural integrity of Northern Indigenous students as they acquire skills to live biculturally, there are only “a gifted few who can easily move between two worlds.” She also maintained that just because a teacher recognizes that he or she is from a dominant culture and that this culture is not the norm of the community, it doesn’t mean “by any stretch of the imagination that a bridge has been built from one to another.” She was convinced that Indigenous individuals who walk in two worlds had built their own bridge; schools had not contributed to this construction. In fact, this teacher was concerned that schools continued to diminish cultural voices.

However conscientiously one determines to build bridges it can prove very difficult to connect profoundly different pedagogic approaches. For example, within traditional Indigenous education, children are seen as having the capacity to decide for themselves what they wish to learn from their elders through observation and to determine how long they will hold their attention on any given activity (Berger, Ross Epp and Moller, 2006). How can that value function within Western schooling which values on-task behavior for set amounts of time? Western schoolteachers are certainly not encouraged to respect the degree of autonomy afforded within Indigenous contexts nor do not always teach in a way that requires observation. A great deal of my teaching came out of the idea that the students and I had shared learning projects. I, and therefore my students, followed a mandated curriculum and adhered to pre-established time periods for study; all students who arrive at school in the morning must be present and accounted for during the school day. While students can resist on the level of the individual learner, on
another level they were not free to decide where they would turn their attention and for how long. Integrating aspects of Indigenous ontology, as I understood them, into the delivery of programs in an institutional setting was challenging more so because my subject matter is English, the imperialist language of colonial power and my particular research interest is writing, a technology that did not exist in Northern Indigenous places prior to contact with Europeans. Finally, it is not possible to posit a unified vision for education originating in Denendeh against a monolithic Western view as if one might pluck something whole and pure out of “the interstices of the colonial and the colonized” (Kanu, 2003, p. 77).

When I began teaching in the North, the theoretical framework to which I turned to help me make my way as a non-Dene teacher in a Dene place was cross-cultural education. Although my early teaching occurred before the internet became ubiquitous, I was able to research through the local library, making particular use of their interlibrary loans (in those days some university libraries were also a part of this system; I do not know if this is still the case). In the late ’80s, the experience of Dene, Métis, Inuvialuit, and Inuit in schools was often constructed as a “culture clash.” I pondered the separateness of Western and Indigenous worldviews, but my lived experience made it impossible for me to neatly divide aspects of people’s ways of being into the two categories. In town, I heard political and identity beliefs that relied heavily on the idea of distinctness and I also heard politically-charged conversations which negated difference. I thought, and indeed still think, of “culture” as defined by Castagno and Brayboy (2008) as a concept that is simultaneously fluid and dynamic, and—at times—fixed and stable. Like an anchor in the ocean, it is rooted to some place—for many Indigenous peoples, the seafloor is the lands on which they live and their ancestors lived and roamed before them. The anchor shifts and sways, like culture, with the changing tides, ebbs, and flows of the ocean or the life, contexts, and situations for Indigenous peoples. (p. 942)
As I understood the cross-cultural literature to which I had access in the late ’80s, difference was emphasized, sometimes even essentialized, and overlaps were overlooked. I found this literature helpful as a starting point as it was useful to consider the possible learning styles in my classroom. I learned, for example, that Indigenous students have an indirect rather than direct orientation to learning concepts, as can be seen in the avoidance of direct questioning (Peacock et al. 1998), or they may approach learning holistically (Cajete, 1994; Bell, D. 2004) But beyond that starting point, the advice wasn’t helpful, as I taught Dene and Métis students who did not behave like ‘Indigenous learners.’ I was grateful for the literature’s insights as I had students who did not look me in the eye as a sign of respect for my position of authority (Hillberg & Tharp, 2002) and I had students who did not like being centered out individually because it is culturally inappropriate to shame others through a display of one’s own knowledge (Goulet, 2001). However, I also had students who looked me squarely in the eye as they volubly shared their understandings.

Although Northern policy documents and many cross-cultural educationalists in the ‘80s called for ‘culture-based’ education, none defined it nor gave many indications about how to implement this approach in the classroom, so sometimes the practices that teachers initiated were repetitious and reductionist. In Fort Simpson, individual parents, leaders, and elders in the community asked different things of the school and these requests did not always follow that Indigenous people wanted to see Indigenous content, perspectives and approaches in Western schools (Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006). Some said that the school should focus on “academics” and leave “culture” to the home; some said that there was too much emphasis placed on the local in school and what Fort Simpson kids need is a broader sense of what is going on in the rest of the world; some said that the curriculum is completely irrelevant and what is necessary is more emphasis on the local and Dene traditional ways. How could I satisfy competing demands? I
could see that superficial efforts such as bringing in a resource person from the community to make slippers with the children was not the answer to culture-based education. Indeed Donald’s call in 2009 for a pedagogy that does not divorce the philosophical foundation from the practices implemented still resonates 20 years after my first experience with ‘culture-based’ education. However, so often Indigenous and Western ways of teaching and learning were treated as so fundamentally different (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008), it was hard to know what to do to integrate Indigenous foundations.

At the Canadian Society for Studies in Education (CSSE) conference in 2009, in a conversation about Indigenous education with interested participants, Richard Atleo, the hereditary chief of the Nuu-chah-nulth Nation, asked that instead of integrating Indigenous education into an existing Western system, we look for the overlap between the two educational systems. Previous work by Marlene Atleo (2006) had named the overlap between Aboriginal education and Euroheritage education as the zone of Aboriginal education: she sees here the opportunity for the infusion of Indigenous perspectives, content and learning strategies and considers this zone as a contemporary shift from assimilationist to dialogic and constructivist frames for Indigenous education. I reflected for some time upon this idea, originally thinking of the overlap as a Venn diagram with arrows indicating a synergy that moved from the overlap into the two distinct systems. But this image was not conducive to the complexity of contemporary life in Fort Simpson as I experienced it, so ultimately I returned to the two rivers metaphor that had been central to my thinking while I lived there.
The two rivers: Possibilities for overlap

The two rivers that ran alongside the town with all of the unseen forces that constituted them dynamically struck me early on as the metaphor for the two people that came together in Fort Simpson. Closest to town was the shallow, murky brown Naechag’ah that had originally come from the Yukon before heading Northeast through British Columbia and furthest away was the deep, slate blue Dehcho River that ran North into the Arctic Ocean. I am certainly not the only one who saw the metaphoric potential in this landscape. Peter Kulchyski (2006), an anthropologist who has done work in the community, considers the moral topography of this place at the confluence of two rivers. He found himself questioning which river will be swept up and which will carry the other along. There is no doubt that the economic impetus behind the move that displaced people from traditional territories to the town so that the land could be exploited by others, points to the power of one river over the other to dictate the flow of existence; however, the other river is not without a will and intentions of its own: will born of resilience and intentions born out of time-immemorial commitments to place. Certainly those of us in education, who see that school as both the site for ongoing colonization and for possible social transformation, sense the urgency of knowing more about the will and intention of the people for whom education is meant to serve. Indeed it may well be possible that Western education cannot serve the needs of Indigenous students.

The image of flowing water bounded by land that shifts and changes reminds us that within the lapping of the commingled waves of rivers there are particles and pathways that cannot be explained. Those rivers in a common landscape are simultaneously distinct and intermingling as they influence and determine their own paths. The deeper, clear water of the Dehcho was the source for the town’s drinking water; an intake pipe runs under the shallower and darker Naechag’ah. In the spring, I watched trees that had been uprooted during the tremendous push of
spring break up as they were yanked and submerged by the powerful unseen currents of the Fort Simpson that seemed as one during that time. In the summer, the silty bottom of the Naechag’ah was shifted and heaved so that as the level of the river lowered, sand banks appeared where they had not been the year before. In fall, the surface of both rivers shone like raw and dark sienna, with the Dehcho reflecting the yellows and golds of the birch and poplar, backed by the rich, dark green of spruce on the far river bank. Both the fall’s stillness and the winter’s jagged frozen surface fashioned a tranquility that belied the powerful surges that continued in the depths beneath.

**Looking for overlap in the *Northernvoices* study**

Although I did not directly take up the search for overlap in the study, teachers spoke about some of the cross-cultural topics that swirl around the North. In two of the focus groups in the pilot study, teachers mentioned the ongoing influence of the oral tradition to such an extent that I reviewed some of the literature on oral and written traditions as it pertains to Indigenous contexts before I began the action research project. Teachers in both studies also spoke about the importance of the visual mode in Northern writing pedagogies. Both the oral and visual traditions will be discussed below. It is interesting to note that the prevalent voices (those who spoke most frequently and seemed to lead the conversation) in the two conversations of the pilot study that addressed these issues, were teachers who had worked in the smallest communities in the NWT. The prevalent voices (those who were the ‘regular attenders’ of both the writing workshops and MSN conversations) in my action research project were teachers who worked in the regional centers and one teacher from Yellowknife.
The ongoing influence of the oral tradition

In two of the February focus groups, the influence of the oral tradition was mentioned as a significant influence on writing pedagogy. In one focus group, when I asked whether they felt strongly that despite “several decades of contact” the oral tradition continues, one teacher answered: “Yes. Oral tradition doesn’t just mean the passing down of stories; it’s about how well you can lie.” At this, another person in the group laughed, and then the first speaker qualified by saying, “Singer says that: When I was a child I was a liar and now I’m grown up I’m a storyteller.” The group had been talking previously about how they encouraged their students to think of writing as “lying” and “stealing.” One said: “Steal words and phrases from other authors to embellish the truth of your story—the truth being the idea that compelled you to write in the first place.” One teacher spoke about how she began her dash three classes (sometimes called remedial, locally developed or basic level in other Canadian jurisdictions) by listening to each other’s stories and another woman interjected, “Oh sure, we take the lie of the day and the lie of the week and from that we can build a story.” The lies, to which the teachers spoke, were anecdotes that drew from real events but exaggerated them or added elements or were anecdotes that had no basis in actual events but contained elements that would convince others that one was in fact, ‘telling the truth.’

When my son was younger, his Dene relatives loved to hear how he had told someone down South a convincing ‘northern’ story, as for example, a story of how his Dad had shot a muskox. The success of those stories relied on his ability as a storyteller (his ability to “lie” and to draw on a general knowledge of hunting), but also on his audience’s lack of knowledge about the geography of the North. There are no muskox in the boreal forest of the Dehcho region where his Dad is from.
The teachers in the pilot study were looking for the overlap between orality and literacy; they were trying to find a “mutually beneficial meeting place where each has a function” (Archibald, 2008, p. 93). I believe that it is possible for orality and literacy to find these meeting places although they will vary with genres and forms. Writing is learned more consciously than speech although Frank Malloway, a Stó:lō elder, told Joanne Archibald (2008) that the voices of spokesmen were developed through conscious practices. Spokesmen learned to speak to their teachers who were on one side of a creek, while they were on the other. Gradually, they progressed to standing on one side of a river while their teacher listened on the other side. Often we think of the mentoring process that develops the content of these stories but oratory skills were also developed. It is possible that the engagement of personal experience that are encouraged in indigenous stories (Sarris, 1993) might serve as another possible meeting place. It may be helpful to our conceptions of Western writing pedagogy to think about what it means when a story is never self-contained. What might it mean about the way we teach writing if we think about the ways that story requires a relationship?

Teachers in the Northernvoices study made the distinction between orality and oral tradition, an important distinction to be made. Orality refers to verbal expression, particularly as it applies to societies where writing technology did not exist until recently. Oral tradition is the history, teachings, and traditions that are transmitted orally. Students who come from an oral tradition are not necessarily voluble. The teachers in the action research project felt that the influence of the oral tradition meant that words were carefully chosen and ideas were thought through before they were expressed. Many teachers report that their Indigenous students are not as talkative in their classes as non-Indigenous students are. While this may in part be due to damaging historical relationships with Western schooling or student experiences of racism, particularly in bicultural or multicultural contexts, it may also be due to expectations for response
time. In Western pedagogies, teachers may require students to speak without ample time to process their thinking and form what it is they wish to say. Teachers can set constraints in the classroom so that those who willingly process their thinking aloud in front of others, do not dominate classroom conversations.

Teachers in the pilot study mentioned that their students struggle with the assumption that one can write about something that the group already knows. This idea was not developed in the pilot focus groups but in a recent conversation with two subject coordinators at the Department of Education, Culture and Employment this topic came up. One of the conversants, a Métis educationalist from a Dene community near Yellowknife, explained how it is considered rude in the belief system that she grew up with to tell people something you know that they already know. We acknowledged how contrary this belief is to the practice of discussing something in the class and then asking students to write about what was just said. It seems to me that the intention of the writing needs to be explained as other or more than a summary of what was just discussed. The conversation should serve as an initial exploration, so that the writing could further or challenge or expand upon the conversation or provide a story or example that illustrates the topics discussed. Another conversant said that after she offered suggestions to her students about what they could add to their writing, they would say, “You know I know that.” As a long-time member of the community, she and her students had already had many class discussions and her students’ knowledge bases and stances would have been known to her; presumably she was seen as the audience for the writing. Participants in the study also felt that in Dene and Inuit oral traditions there was a respect for the power of the word, such words were consciously chosen for stylistic, not only semantic reasons for their impact on the listeners.

The influence of the oral tradition meant that metaphor was a vital part of instruction in writing pedagogy for two of the teachers in the pilot study. In their 1998 study, Cleary and
Peacock also spoke to the ability of Indigenous students to make the necessary connections in stories from what Neal McLeod (2007) would call collective memory. McLeod writes about nehiyawiwin (Creeness) which is lived memory held in stories and relationships and involves the spiritual dimension of experience, not only the physical experiences of the immediate world.

These stories that make connections rely on metaphoric abstraction. Teachers in the pilot study found metaphor essential to instruction and had a lengthy conversation about its usefulness during the revision process. One teacher felt that revision was “unnatural” for her students, given the inability to revise an oral text as it is spoken; one can edit one’s words but there is no room for a complete structural overhaul. This teacher found it useful to make connections to other practices such as hunting likening some of the processes that occurred in writing to some that took place during the preparation of an animal once it has been killed. The other teacher, spoke about asking her students to tell stories about times they had ‘revised’ practices in their lives before she made the connection that revision in writing is similar to the revising practices a student may have told such as, for example, of how he approached fixing his car.

These teachers went on to explore the connection between the ongoing influence of the oral tradition and the student’s ability to respond and represent visually. One teacher said: “I think storytelling lends itself to visualizing—to seeing the concept—and as soon as the kids start to put labels to things, it changes the nature of how they view it. When they don’t have the word to attach to the visual, it becomes very difficult for them to express…I’m thinking that…some kind of visual element—drawing, painting, sculpture, whatever—says more than the written word does. It takes a long time to get the written words out.”
The importance of the visual mode

Teachers in both the pilot and action research study thought that many of their Indigenous students were very good visual learners, but how this facility might connect to writing practices took many pathways. One participant suggested that drawing may jog students’ memories and could be a generative practice for writing. In general, teachers from the smaller communities in the pilot said that their students would draw and paint much more readily than they would “come to the word.” One of the teachers reminded us that outside of any question of whether students are “visual learners” we, in schools, begin the schooling process by asking them to draw and paint. A teacher who had worked mostly with primarily grades over her career observed the elementary teachers saw the need for both visual and print literacy; she said her “fantasy was that [children] will have enough creative play at the younger levels so that when they get to high school they are not so blocked.” A teacher from a Yellowknife high school, in the pilot study, suggested that her students are very resistant to drawing or painting because they see it as “a very elementary way of expressing” themselves. She suggested that school has implied that drawing belongs “lower on the scale.”

Another teacher in the pilot spoke of the students’ propensity with visual texts but admitted that she said she didn’t ask her students to produce them frequently; however, she did ask her students to make sense of photographs, art reproductions, and illustrations in her English class. She reported that she found it easier to generate analysis of a visual text than analysis of a literary text because students feel “there is so much to pull out.” Other teachers chimed in to say that they did ask students to respond visually to literary texts and also spoke about using visuals to generate print texts. In both the pilot study and the Northernvoices study, we distinguished between using a visual text as a prompt for writing and utilizing the visual mode in writing. Margaret makes this distinction when she says: “I think visual stimulus is increasingly important
because of changes in the media. Although there have always been people who are stronger visual learners, I wonder if a need for visual stimulus isn’t rather a different thing.” It occurred to me that more might be done with these practices than we do; for example, comparing the process that is responding visually to a print text or generating a print text in response to a visual to see what the students make of those transformations. Another teacher said she often asked students to represent concepts visually, particularly ‘theme’ which she felt her students found difficult to put into words. After they had represented the theme of a text, visually, she asked them to supplement their visual with an oral explanation.

During the conversation about the difficulties of drawing from memory, one teacher in the February pilot suggested that she thought that representation in visual images might be less threatening to students. Some of the teachers in that focus group thought that perhaps it was because visual images are more open to interpretation, while one teacher felt that visual images might allow the viewer to make a more personal connection to the image because the artist does not seem as present as a writer. With writing, one assumes that more of the writer is there “on the line” than presumably the artist is present in the brush stroke of movement of clay. The teacher felt that the students, as viewers of visual texts and readers of print texts, felt they had “more of a right to engage” with visual texts. This conversation left me wondering about what we communicate to students about visual and print texts. As a former art teacher as well as an English teacher, I knew of art teachers who taught as though the artist’s intention was all that mattered. Students in the classrooms of those teachers required interpretation of an expert to make sense of works of art as much as the students in English classrooms oriented by a formalist approach required the expert exegesis of the teacher in order to make sense of a text. Perhaps English teachers are less likely to take a formalist stance to do visual texts since the “texts” that form the repertoire for English classes has only recently broadened to include dynamic and static
visual texts. English teachers may not be educated enough to speak from an expert stance and therefore encourage their students to respond personally rather than critically to visual texts. In English class, I suspect that we do not spend as much time asking the students to explore how a visual text means; indeed, Laurence in one of our MSN conversations, suggested that this requires a lot of time such that teachers are not able to do justice to this. He also suggested that teachers must have some background in the elements and principles of visual design and doubted that that had been part of people’s formal education in teaching.

After the conversations about the visual, I am left wondering why students might feel that approaching a visual text is less challenging than a print text. I am speculating but it seems that there might be possibilities for why this is so. It seems to me that the teachers may assume, as in the one who first mentioned that the writer is “there on the line” that the illusion that we are connecting to the writer may impede the students willingness to offer his or her opinion on the writer’s words. The consciousness of the visual artist may not seem as close or perhaps the symbols of communication create connections that seem less direct and more open to interpretation than the illusion of one mind speaking to another through words on the page.

Whatever, the reasons the importance of the visual mode to teaching and learning in Indigenous contexts has been many (Fixico, 2003) other than the teachers in the pilot and action research study. Beyond the idea that Indigenous students may be primarily visual-spatial learners is the idea that a teacher should encourage practices that utilize all the senses to build symbolic meaning in support of learning new concepts in classes.

New literacies: A possible overlap

The conversations about the students’ propensity for oral and visual modes are presented with the cautionary reminder of the danger of reducing our ideas about any learners to one-
Many of the students in the NWT may well manifest a preference for oral and visual modes derived from culturally-rooted practices that produce distinct orientations toward teaching and learning (The Alberta Education Department), but it is also possible, that, like so many of their contemporaries they are comfortable in a multimodal world. Many of the teachers in the studies noted that they felt as Kress (2003) does that the communicational world of which we are all a part is becoming increasingly visual. Teachers’ practices in Northern classrooms pointed to the possibility that new literacies may overlap Indigenous learning preferences more than older print-centric literacies. The New Literacy Studies (e.g. Gee 2006 and Street, 2006) are predicated on the belief that literacy practices only make sense when studied within historical, political and economic practices. Teachers may need to reconsider their conceptions of “literacy” as "the term which refers to (the knowledge of) and the use of the resource of writing" (Kress 2003, p. 22) and instead recognize the need to offer a broader range of multimodal experiences. Literacy practices as they related to Information Communications Technology (ICT) are becoming central to effective English education in these times of rapidly evolving means of communication (Swenson, 2006). “With the growing range of texts available to students today, literacy skills have expanded to reading images, codes, and sounds in addition to words” (p.223). Beyond learning how to deal with and create print texts, students today learn to read media objects of all descriptions (Gee, 2006; Street, 2006). In many communities, students are adept with new technologies (although it should be noted that this access is not universal—some communities still have many issues with bandwidth, which leaves them less connected to the ‘wired world’ than others. It should also be noted that in some communities in the NWT, when the internet ‘goes down’ for one reason or another, because of distance and limited availability of technicians it can take a long time before the internet is up and running again.)
Many teachers spoke of their successes with writing projects that involved ICT. A teacher from one of the smaller communities said: “Our kids are really very excited when they can use photographed images, construct a PowerPoint presentation and add short pieces of text.” Other teachers supported this claim and suggested software such as Comic Life. One stated: “Kids can take images they snap outside or wherever and use them as backdrop to construct cartoons, comic strips, graphic novels…so there’s a melding of Native and non-Native forms of writing.”

Many participants also mentioned successes with graphic novels in their classes but Margaret also interjected in one conversation about responses to texts: “Why can’t they respond with graphic stories?” She recounted experiences with student-created videos but also mentioned how time consuming the editing process can be. Other teachers said that this had deterred them from taking on video more often since they had to “nag” students to revise and edit “the first draft” of their videos as much as they nagged for the revision of first draft writing.

Although students’ reactions were described as enthusiastic in response to using ICT, the teachers’ reactions were mixed about the perceived successes of the creations software such as PowerPoint or Comic Life. Some had had great successes while others felt that for the amount of time they had committed from class, the results were not worth it. Some teachers noted that, in general, while the students enjoy using visuals they were not always careful in their selection or use of visuals and so their ezines, given as one example, “lacked substance.” There was some discussion about why this might be and again the conversation turned to the necessary background information that teachers and students require to make effective choices. Teachers also felt that there might be a clash between the purposes and audiences of students’ out-of-school literacy practices with ICT which may interfere with the educational purposes the teacher has in mind. The editing required for a post on YouTube, for example, when one is looking for hits based on a funny scenario encountered and digitized, may not comply with the editing
requirements the teacher assumes for a clip related to the learning project underway in the classroom.

In addition to resisting editing of multimedia presentations, teachers indicated that their students resisted the analysis of static and dynamic visual texts. For example, while photographs played an important part as a visual stimulus for writing in many of the teacher’s pedagogies, and was an important part of students’ out-of-school literacy practices such as posting on Facebook, teachers expressed concern that students struggled with analyzing a photograph, which is one of the requirements of the Alberta general level diploma. Similarly, in a discussion around film in the classroom, although teachers felt that their students watched many videos, they did not find the students willing to engage in analysis of film techniques or particularly willing to think of the film as literature in the classroom. All of the teachers used film in the classroom, but they argued that it did not follow that because students are avid watchers of film, they will possess the language needed to talk about it in ways other than identifying what they liked.

Furthermore, because students have established practices with the way they approach film, they often resisted the practices and habits of mind the teachers tried to establish. Margaret reported trying to get to the bottom of her students’ resistance to how she asked them to approach film by informally interviewing them about their film-watching habits. Her students reported coming and going from digitized films as they played. Often the same film would be viewed many times over but students reported that they rarely watched the film from beginning to end. Even when someone leaves the room for a short amount of time such as required to retrieve a snack or take a bathroom break, the film is not paused. Eric added that his students mentioned the same at-home practice but complained vociferously about his practice of stopping the film to direct the students’ attention to something.
Possible conflict in the meeting places

While possibilities may exist for engaging students in writing through new literacy practices, it is clear that more research is required into how these literacies might be used effectively in the classroom. Battiste’s (2000) critique that "the existing curriculum has given Aboriginal people new knowledge to help them participate in Canadian society, but it has not empowered Aboriginal identity by promoting an understanding of Aboriginal worldviews” (p. 192) may be a pertinent critique of new literacies practices. New literacies are as likely as print-centric practices to focus attention on worldviews other than Indigenous ones and as likely to negate the damaging colonial legacy in education. Additionally, it is not clear how they might foster learning across the many levels involved in education because as Kirkness and Barnhardt (1991) note Indigenous communities desire an education that will bring them “not just empowerment as individuals but empowerment as bands, as tribes, as nations, and as people” (p. 3).

In many communities in the North, I have heard elders and other educational leaders express concern that ICT attracts students to evermore popular Western culture taking them further and further away from the practices of their ancestors. Margaret mentioned that in her lifetime, t.v. has gone from a somewhat rare commodity to a constant fixture in most lives; in the NWT, TV is omnipresent. Popular culture is significant to many young people in Northern communities; indeed, Tom mentioned his joking use of Kanye West lyrics with students, and Eric spoke about learning about L’il Wayne as the lyrics of his music made so much meaning for one of his students. Despite the influence of popular culture, it may well be that, given the opportunity, students would willingly engage with traditional Indigenous activities. When we were discussing the thinking required for writing, a teacher in the pilot questioned how “natural” some of the activities in the classroom were for her students. She spoke of the way her students
were comfortable “reading the land” and wondered in what ways we might draw upon their relative ease with spatial awareness in schools. “Put them on the land and they will be able to tell you exactly what their processes are—their thinking processes, their application processes…but to be able to survive in the classroom with pen and paper, it’s more difficult.”

Kress’s (2003) understanding of what it means to engage students in multimodal experiences goes beyond a list of new activities for the teacher to try in the classroom. Kress believes that new literacies shape the way one thinks and responds to the world. It may well be that an emphasis on new literacies might encourage teachers to think about the ways that spatial understandings might enter into the classroom. While visual and aural modes might be more readily adaptable, I contend that Western schooling is not as open to the ways that spatial understanding might shape the way we relate in the world. I think back to Reynold (2004) who invites us to think about our students’ writing moves; how might we think about our students’ learning “moves”? And while, there are some Indigenous public intellectuals, elders and leaders who consider new literacies a threat to traditional ways of being there are those who are interested in the way that new technologies can support a renaissance of Indigenous traditions. It may be that students will learn their traditional language in schools through digitized resources. It may well be that new literacies practices in classrooms of the near future will support Eric’s claim that, “digital storytelling is the new oral tradition.”

It is possible that the overlap between Indigenous and Western pedagogies can be found in a more deliberate establishing of interaction between multiple modalities (tactile, visual, auditory, etc.) by which students receive information in educational contexts. In a multimodal interaction a user may receive information by vision and sound and respond by voice and touch. In a multimodal English class, composing is more than writing; text ‘making’ or text creation’ is broader. The implications for digital writing include a great reliance on collaborative writing and
an audience other than the teacher. It may well be that these possibilities, along with a deliberate engagement of multimodalities, may invite Indigenous students to writing in a way that print-centric practices have not. This may be an interesting site for future research.

The potential for overlap that I saw in the two rivers that run side-by-side represents a dynamic exchange. Currents shift and the creatures in the waters navigate their routes through changing pathways. We have been told by sages in many traditions that we can never expect a river to remain the same from one moment to the next. In the spirit of this exchange, it is imperative that the potential for new literacies be explored with the active involvement of all who are implicated. In order to find “a mutually beneficial meeting place,” however fleeting and transitory, it is imperative that new literacies do not become just another ‘answer’ to ‘the problem’ of educating Indigenous people. If new literacies allow students the opportunity to explore what they wish to say in a manner that works for them, then they do indeed offer new possibilities for engaging writing practices for students in the Northwest Territories.
Chapter 8
What’s so Personal about Personal Writing?

I begin with a confession…

I wasn’t thrilled about moving to Yellowknife in 2001, but I had run out of things to do in Fort Simpson. When I was younger I might have moved to one of the smaller places in Denendeh or more Northern treeless ones in the Inuvialuit territory but by 2001, I felt those days had passed. I wasn’t really sure where I might have liked to live outside of the NWT, and although my husband identified as an artist and as such saw himself as belonging to a community of Canadian artists, he is a Dene man, at home in Northern places. And there was also the matter of raising two half-Dene children and deciding what might be in their best interest. We moved to Yellowknife.

Moving to the Northern ‘city,’ after 14 years of telling my students that we ought not to compare our community to Yellowknife as we had a lot going for us in Fort Simpson, felt like a betrayal. I had known my students well in Fort Simpson (an advantage some of the participants in the study point to as well), and while I was looking forward to a degree of anonymity that was never afforded in a small locale, I was worried that I would miss the strictly bicultural nature of the Fort Simpson school. Yellowknife was more multicultural: of the 750 students in the Yellowknife public high school, 25% were of Indigenous descent; this percentage was higher at the local Catholic high school. The other 75% included some second- and third-generation non-Indigenous Yellowknifers and others who had moved from across Canada and beyond because their parents had come for work, largely in government or mining.

Additionally, I wasn’t sure if I could ever come to care about Yellowknife, the place that I had characterized as the land of scrawny trees set on Precambrian rock. Fort Simpson had trees
significant in stature owing to a thin layer of top soil, which had allowed me to have a garden; in Yellowknife, top soil is shipped in for lawn and gardens for resolute homeowners. As well, it was that much colder in Yellowknife because it was just that much further North with winter coming in mid-October and lasting into May when the still-frozen lake sent refrigerated breezes wafting over the town. I much preferred the less frigid majesty of the mighty rivers that ran alongside the smaller town.

I also had my misgivings about living in ‘the party town’ of the NWT. Excessive drinking was also an issue in Fort Simpson but even sobriety in the North can be a place-based reality with some non-drinkers from the communities “kicking their heels up” at the Yellowknife bars kept busy on a regular basis by the affluence of the capital city. I didn’t like the gobs of spit I sometimes saw on the sidewalk outside the downtown mall or the gritty dirt from the summer streets that occasionally gusted into my face. I didn’t care about old-time frontier stories and I wasn’t interested in learning about mining. I didn’t like what I considered to be a distancing of the people in the capital city from the smaller Northern communities as though Yellowknife had more in common with southern cities than Northern villages. Many Yellowknifers are wilderness buffs, enjoying long-distance canoe or snowmobile trips, but alas, I am not interested in those activities for more than an afternoon. However, I liked that music and arts and physical recreation activities abounded and that the town was large enough to have an excellent bookstore, a year-round indoor swimming pool, walking trails around the town’s many little lakes, a cross-country ski club, a lovely golden beach, nice restaurants and enough shops to buy anything needed so I could drop the stocking-up mentality of the previous 14 years.

While aspects of the town grew on me as I came to know more about it, I very quickly came to care for my new students and appreciated the opportunity to work within a staff of over 50 people. I also appreciated the opportunity to write with other people. In Fort Simpson where I
first developed an interest in writing, I wrote alone, although I participated in writers’ workshops in the summers or via correspondence through Humber College for Writers. Yellowknife had two writers’ groups from which to choose during the time I lived there and was also one of the two localities where NorthWords, the annual writer’s festival organized by the Territorial Writers Association, was hosted. All of my writing, during my five years in Yellowknife was set in Ontario and while I’ve been in Ontario, I have been writing almost exclusively about the NWT. The members of my Yellowknife writing group often asked me why I never wrote about the North.

**Let’s not get personal about personal writing**

I started this section with a “confession” because personal writing is sometimes construed as confessional writing: disclosure is the center of gravity and the purpose is therapeutic. I do not discount writing’s capacity for healing; indeed three of the study’s teachers spoke about this, but I do not think that “personal” need refer to aspects of personal experience that one would hesitate to share in public, nor do I think that this capacity for writing should be the goal in writing practices we set up for students. Tom acknowledged that “some of the stuff in the North that our students are going through is pretty raw and might not always be appropriate for school.” Over the years, I did have students deal with these types of “personal” issues in their writing, and when this occurred I became a human being first and an evaluator of writing second. I would discuss the writing with students to see what support they might need in their lives and then tell them that I could not mark the assignment because marking it means that both the marker and writer can stand back from the writing to critique it. Out of respect for the subject matter, I couldn’t do that; we would consider the task completed, but there would be no marks.
When the personal is construed a dealing with the intimate emotional details of a life, it brings us to the question of audience. For whom is the writing? In two conversations in the pilot study, teachers spoke about practices they used to distinguish private writing (that is, writing that students might do for themselves) from public writing they might do for others. Teachers spoke about practices that allowed for private writing in their class, such as asking students to indicate with an asterix journal entries they wanted the teacher to read, set aside areas for journals meant only from private writing and allowing students to take their journals home. But in the voice lessons study, Margaret saw an issue with keeping the private and public separate. Who is responsible when another student reads writing that the author has not intended to be read by anyone? In the pilot study, one teacher said that a student expressed concern even about keeping private writing at home. My compromise position was to aim for public writing but I let students know that if they found themselves writing something private they could continue to do so and just take it home and determine what they wished to do with it themselves.

Possibilities exist for personal writing that can speak to an audience other than oneself (although what initially compels us to take on the writing may well be idiosyncratic and very particular to the individual writer.) Robert Nash (2004), in his book on personal scholarly narrative, speaks of his use of “specifics, personal events and people in his life to serve main philosophical purposes” (p. 30). He acknowledges that personal writing can be emotionally upsetting and recommends that writers take an ethical response and personal responsibility to themselves and disclose only what they are ready to deal with.

A teacher in the pilot spoke about finding it easier to “hook” students into writing once students can identify an interest or passion, but “if there is a student who is like NNaaaaahhhhh, [she] can’t grab them.” The observations of these teachers certainly do not challenge the premise of process writing that students should be writing about subject of interest to them (Burkhardt,
2003, Rief, 2007, Newkirk, 2009): “It is important to engage students in writing about aspects of their own lives, rather than aspects of the lives that we as teachers expect them to have.” Other participants, in both the pilot and the voice lessons study, spoke about the “appropriateness of content” and the constraints they felt that this put on student writing; some felt, like Margaret, that they would “try to be more generous with [their] parameters.” But Eric said that he found, in general, students were not open to invitations to “write about their lives, what they’ve experienced, what they’ve learned. They claim to have forgotten anything that took place in their lives up to yesterday.” In conversation with him, I speculated about what might happen if we didn’t ask students to first identify what it is they wanted to write about because this practice often stymied so many of my previous student writers.

At the beginning of a high school English course, I did ask students to create a list of what Lucy McCormick Calkins (1994) calls “writing territories.” (A writing territory is a topic around which one has something to say). I always gave students the opportunity to use this list or draw from some of the generative writing practices that produced writing that was kept in their writer’s folder, portfolio, or notebook, depending upon the various collection strategies I tried over the years. I had students who self-selected, who took options such as the opportunity to continue on a piece of writing of their own devising, but most of my least confident writers selected topics for expansion from writing ideas they had already initiated through the writing practices stored in whatever folder was à la mode in my class.

What Eric and Laurence and Margaret and I discussed in one MSN conversation was the possibility for teachers to create conditions for students to write out of their “territories” without asking them to make a list. In spite of beliefs to the contrary, students sometimes find that they do indeed have something to say. Additionally, setting the conditions helped get around some of the difficulties we encountered in the writing when students identified their territories. For
example, sports tournaments often made the list of writing territories in my classes and when
students tried to write about their experience of a tournament, the writing often fell flat. I think
one issue was that students hadn’t actually identified what was so great about the
tournament—were they writing a David and Goliath story? Were they writing about the
camaraderie of the team? Was it the cheering fans that made them feel so heady and if this is the
case, was there actually anything in the story that might make meaning for someone other than
themselves? When students come back, victorious or otherwise, from a sports tournament and
relate their story, generally, I listen out of respect for the relationship whether the story is a good
one or not. I am happy for the person who had a great time or I commiserate with the person who
lost and I can ask questions or comment to maintain interest. When I read a student’s account of a
tournament, I cannot rely on my own input to direct the story to help maintain my interest
(although I still have relationship concerns as well as pedagogic interest in the writing). If the
writer has not done a good job of imagining the signposts that will need to guide me through the
tournament experience, I will not find the story easy to follow. If the student hasn’t gone beyond
thinking that the experience was fun and exciting to think through the center of gravity for writing
about it, then I will get a running account of what she did with a few indicators “the crowd went
wild” that something exciting happened but I will find the account, rather boring. And the
students do, too, after they have written their account which seems to be quite disheartening.

The teachers in both the pilot and the action research study said they enjoyed writing out
of their personal experiences that the writing workshops afforded and felt that they wanted
students to have the opportunity to enjoy this possibility. At any rate, as Eric pointed out, the
expectation on Alberta diploma exams is that “students will use personal examples when possible
in addition to textual ones, so we must continue to find a way to approach the teaching of
personal writing that works for Northern students.”
I am thinking about possibilities for the “personal” of personal writing as stemming from what Abram call the “life world”—our immediately lived experience, as we live it” (1996, p. 40). Although it may be tempting to think of thoughts and experiences as separate from the subject, because our thoughts do seem to have a content that is not entirely dependent upon us, this idea is inconsistent with the way in which intentional states present themselves. We don’t doubt that our thoughts or experiences are our own when we have them; we never dispute the ownership of the states although we sometimes dispute their veracity. In judging the accuracy, we have to rework how they are integrated into the overall pattern of our life. “[T]he identification of a particular experience or thought already presupposes a system of experiences and thoughts within which that experience or thought is embedded. But to presuppose such a system is already to presuppose a particular subject—a particular subjective space and a particular ‘perspective’—to whom the experiences and thoughts in question belong” (Malpas, 1999, p. 77/78). What is distinctive about our being-in-the-world, our “dasein” to use Heidegger’s term, is that our consciousness both projects the things of the world and is subjected to the world by the very nature of existence in the world.

Personal experience encompasses this particular subjective space and particular perspective embedded also within the condition of being sensate. But although sensory images often vitalize writing, this aspect of our life-world is often not the focus of personal writing although it could be (Brooke, 2003). For example, if I were to write about one of my walks to Rat Lake in Yellowknife as I remember experiencing it; it might go something like this:

I am on the short path looking directly at the lake where water flashes off the backs of ducks as they glide into the middle of the small lake. I walk toward the lake under the watchful gaze of the crooked birch I have named the witch tree. Cattails rustle beside me and I glance at the scolding redwing blackbird seemingly too heavy for the
sedge upon which he balances. He is very close and quite agitated. I scan the reeds for his mate. I am suddenly aware that the pond is silent. When did the frogs stop? I hadn’t anticipated frogs in Hard Rock. I had seen a few leopard frogs in Fort Simpson where it is warmer, but I had thought that the clacking and carrying on I heard in the reeds that encircle ponds around Hard Rock was a very shy, small species of duck. I kept hoping to spot one of them, until my adolescent son informed me that what I should be looking for was a small brown frog. While I am looking at the reeds thinking about the frogs, my foot sinks into the primordial mush that edges the trail. I glance at the tip of my muddy running shoe, grateful that mud is only a thin layer over very hard rock in this part of the North. My attention is diverted by the sun’s glint off a vein of quartz in the mined shoulders of outcrop of rock, and then again as I try to place the heavy tang of metal I perceive in the air while a gust of wind blows the blackbird off his perch. Or at least it seems that way as he has taken flight and disappears from perception somewhere over the ridge of rock against the backdrop of black spruce.

In the action research study, Eric commented that his students think writing always requires a plot. Nothing happens that resolves a conflict in my account of what I might have paid attention to on my walk to Rat Lake. I would like to try an exercise outdoors that asks students to pay attention to what attracts their attention. I think they would find they had something about which to write. Emphasizing the primacy of subject matter in every writing exercise might well be overrated—tracking what a mind does, or what the writer thinks it does and how s/he chooses to represent this might be interesting. I think the writing might give us something to notice afterwards—perhaps we might notice what we did to invite a reader to share in the experience we represented in writing.
Generally, when we ask students to write about personal experience, I don’t think we expect the subject matter to be the condition of being sensate. Rather we expect them to write about something that stands out from the routines or the automaticity of living, something that stands out because it is markedly different from what came before and what went after. An experience raises itself out of the mere continuum of the everyday to take on a specific shape, a specific form. According to Dewey “we have an experience when the material experienced runs its course to fulfillment” (1934, p. 35). In writing, we can shape and give form to the conviction that there is a ‘something’ marked off, or even to the inchoate sense we have of something worth marking off. Writing provides the opportunity to think about experiences—to bring shape to them through deliberate rational analysis, philosophizing, reflection, revisioning, imagining, expanding and juxtaposition. Writing can allow us to make multiple meanings out of “the proper units of knowledge” that, for Varela 1999), are primarily concrete, embodied, incorporated, lived” (p. 7). Writing that reminds a reader of embodied lived experience will necessarily draw from the condition of being sensate.

**Sensory details are personal**

Many of the teachers used writing practices that asked students to use sensory images or details and found these practices highly effective. Some of the teachers created practices that begin with specific details to build up a framework out of which the students develop ideas for their writing (contrary to the way teachers sometimes work, asking students to fill in specific details afterwards). Teachers said that students were adept at writing out of sensory details when the prompts encouraged this but when the assignments given began with an emphasis on creating a text, only the more confident writers thought to bring this to their writing. Overall, the teachers were enthusiastic about practices that drew upon sensory details. For these teachers, working with
sensory details is personal for as Eric said: “The students have no choice but to think for themselves, as only they know what they are sensing.” The teachers in the study pointed to the ways that practices that encouraged writing grounded in the particulars of the life worlds of their students engaged them in writing.

“Qualia, plural of the Latin quale, is a key term in consciousness studies, meaning the specific nature of our subjective experience of the world” (Lodge, 2002, p. 8). Examples of qualia would be the freshly smoked moose hide smell of new slippers or the taste and texture of muktuk (beluga fat)—distinct phenomena that many Northern people have experienced but can be difficult to describe. Writing allows us to try to capture “the dense specificity of personal experience, which is always unique, because each of us has a slightly different personal history, modifying every new experience we have; and the creation of literary texts recapitulates this uniqueness” (Lodge, 2002, p.10/11).

Writing out of a Northern identity

In a post after a writing workshop, Liz mentioned the facility award-winning Canadian Métis writer Joseph Boyden (2009) has with specific qualia in his writing. She commented: “In “Through Black Spruce” he connects [to readers] through modern themes, yet grounds his writing very firmly in Northern identity. His sense of place permeates the narrative and enriches it, rather than bogging it down or isolating it.” The consensus in the discussion that ensued afterward on MSN was that students, too, can be encouraged to write out of their Northern identity simply by giving them the freedom to write about things that interest them. This did not mean that the teacher’s prompts were laissez faire but rather carefully constructed so that students would be free to do this. Eric wrote, in a response to a writing activity, that the teacher needs to allow the students to teach him or her about what is relevant to their lives because there is so much that the
students know that is not addressed in school. Dave said: “I find my students are often reluctant to write…regardless, I have more success when I can make the activity, whatever it is, relevant to their lives (culture, experiences, etc).” Many educationalists have pointed to the critical importance of relevancy to students’ engagement in learning. Deborah Appleman (2007) says that what students do in school needs to matter to them and furthermore they need to feel important for doing the work that is the exploration or explanation of what matters. She understands relevancy as “constructing significance” (p. 144) which, for me, goes far beyond the practice of encouraging the student hockey players in the classroom to write about hockey day in and day out. For Appleman, it is about creating and recreating fresh opportunities to make discoveries about what they know.

Teachers spoke about the ways they work with personal material from which students can draw. Tom spoke about an improvisational drama game he did called “questions” that was successful. He interjected prompts within a scene that was “out skidooing;” (it seems to me that this improvisational game could be played as a writing game, as well.) In order to facilitate students’ active engagement in topics that interest them, Eric said he let “the students coach him.” Tom said that he felt “rapid writes” allowed students to “write about their Northern identity…often on an unconscious level.” Once again, the implication seems to be that teachers need to know their students so that they can set conditions that will invite students to write.

The importance of talk was implicated in writing practices as some teachers felt that Northern identity was more commonly constructed in oral exchanges rather than in written texts. These teachers encourage students to talk about their experiences as these “oral texts” could provide a foundation for a piece of writing. In a pilot focus group, the participants spoke about the possibilities for transcribing the students’ oral stories and then helping them mine those stories for potential written stories.
Writing out of a sense of place

The teachers did not specifically mention the importance of a sense of place to their students’ writing, but, interestingly they identified it in their own writing. Participants often returned to images from family homes and other prior experiences for their writing. It could be that the practices I set encouraged this return, or it could also be that the places of our early years influence us profoundly, or perhaps a combination of both. Perhaps the return to familial images is grounded in an openness to place that we have as young people. In modern Western times, we are encouraged to define ourselves either as economic beings who may need to be mobile in a global economy or as cultural beings who require travel experiences to expand our identities. It may be that the work identities of some teachers in Northern places is so encompassing that they do not “dwell” (to use Heidegger’s term) in their places, only live there while they teach. It could be that they experience a sense of being out-of-place in Northern localities such that they are drawn to images from periods in their lives when they felt emplaced.

I concur with Malpas (1999) for whom the life of the mind is given form in the spaces human beings dwell and those places influence memories, feelings and thoughts. “The stuff of our ‘inner’ lives is thus to be found in the exterior spaces or places in which we dwell, while those same spaces and places are themselves incorporated ‘within’ us (p. 6). For Malpas, human life and identity as established in relation to place is not simply a literary conceit or, for that matter, a feature of human psychology grounded as it might be in biology or evolution. The close connection between being-in-the world and spatiality, locality and embodiment has a great influence on being the kind of creature who can engage with the world and with objects and events in it, and who can think about the world and find itself in it.

For Mauk (2006), “the economy, geology, geography, demographics, aesthetics, and history of a surrounding region, or neighborhood, all figure into the idea of a
particular place” (p. 198). Mauk contends that other places had already ‘crystallize[d]’ the identities of the students he encounters in an academic setting (p. 204). Teachers who see “writing instruction as rooted in time and space and within material conditions that affect students who are often transient residents of learning communities” (Reynolds, 2004, p. 3) will take into consideration that the other locations in which students dwell, visit and remember reflect particular ideologies, social and cultural practices and discourse conventions that both construct and identify them.

In some ways, Mauk’s concerns echo those of the Northern teachers who felt that many of their students were lost in schools. In particular, this became a topic of interest in one of the focus groups in the February pilot of my research study. Teachers in that group, felt that school asks their students to do many things that do not feel “natural” to them and disavows them of the experience of feeling capable and competent. Mauk’s strategy was to prompt his students to write from their own material/physical experiences, recognizing that the ultimate goal of pedagogy, according to the Dewey work he cites, is to take students from where they are to where they are not: Academia. The problem, as he pointed out, is the ‘here’ of the instructors is not ‘where’ the students think they are. This understanding can enliven a classroom where texts are construed as created in particular places and interpreted in particular places. Through this understanding “pedagogic tools such as workshops, peer editing, debates, informal discussion, and conferences” (Mauk, 2006) will change, as students feel freer to locate themselves in the places they occupy. Classrooms can no longer be the solid places some think they are.

The very structure of the human mind is tied to locality and spaces. We can move objects and see objects from different perspectives, make sounds, remember the past—these possibilities come before the acts of communication that are basic to thought and interpretation. Malpas
(1999) contends that “without a grasp of the places and spaces in which others can be encountered it is arguable whether there can be any relation to others at all—and if no relation to others, then no relation to self either” (p. 12). The intimate connection between person and place, self and environing world is a fundamental structure that makes possible what is characteristically human while also constituting human identity. Everything takes place in place.

**Writing out of memory**

Memory is linked to place. Often we think of memory as a cognitive process involving the storage of previous perceptions; in our study, participants linked memory to words like “forgetting” and “remembering.” The difficulties that drawing from memory represents may stem from “when you are young, you often feel that you don’t have much to draw from” as Margaret reminded us, further suggesting that many students may not be against drawing from memory per se. In another conversation, she suggested that “with all of the technologies available now for recording memories and information, memory is not valued as it once” since “despite the fact that we do a lot orally today we make records of events other than in our memories.” Although we spoke of memory as a cognitive process involving the storage of previous perceptions, I am interested in the thinking of Hardcastle (1995) who also implicates the processing of current perceptions. That is, “memory systems are responsible for the processes through which perceptual inputs are interpreted according to stored information (p. 3). For her, consciousness is activity in a semantic memory system.

Although we often think of memory in connection to the dimensionality of time, for Malpas and Indigenous wisdom traditions, it is as much tied to the spatial as the temporal. Memory requires a grasp of the successiveness of events, but also the spatial nesting of events and objects in relation to other events and objects. When I asked participants to draw from
memory in the workshops, I was thinking of memory in the temporal aspect of its dimensionality. In this case, participants in the both the pilot and voice lessons study thought that drawing from memory could be important for students but the enabling constraints would have to be carefully constructed as some students were very vulnerable and avoided delving into memory. I suggested that in that situation we might think of memory as shared classroom memories as a way of taking the pressure off the individual and ultimately making these activities less fraught. But beyond shared memories, there are conceptions of memory that might also make drawing from memory possible. Eric, who also taught Northern Studies, a compulsory Grade 10 Social Studies course, spoke about his successes using autobiography in that course. He said that autobiography “connected with kids who knew their past and were proud of it.” It occurred to him in our MSN conversation that he might bring more of that to English and reflected on the way that we think about subject disciplines as being distinct hinders our practices.

In construing memory differently, I might have allowed us to borrow from Neal McLeod’s (2007) conception of collective memory. More than simply ‘storytelling,’ collective memory is an embodied, spatial understanding that emplaces singular lives into a larger context and describes and proscribes ways for those lives to be lived. Collective memory is an intergenerational process anchored in places and landscapes. McLeod, like Basso in the Apache landscape, notes that place-names in the Cree landscape are shorthand encoding of experience; relationships that articulate the core of Cree values and worldviews. The stories that come from place names are descriptive and analytical and represent an awareness of the past in a present context, highlighting elements of import to the audience at the moment of the telling.

Many years ago, in a general level Grade 11 English class (of students whose average age was probably older than their Southern counterparts), I created a course in Indigenous literature and integrated the standard fare into our courses: for example, after we studied Tomson
Highway’s plays, we compared and contrasted them to Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*. In that particular class, all of my students except Joe, were Dene. One of the assignments asked students to consider aspects of their heritage. I kept it open enough that students would be able to research aspects of past cultural experiences that might make meaning for them even if the information did not come from a familial source, although I did require both oral and print sources. Through these inquiries, I was trying to get at what McLeod (2007) calls the lived memory held in stories and relationships. I mentioned my non-Dene student Joe because he took up an inquiry into his ‘Irishness’ which involved talking to members of his family as well as researching textual sources to find out about the history of movement from Ireland to Canada. Students shared their investigations and Joe’s was well received by his classmates, just as he was open to and learned from the stories of his colleagues. McLeod explores the potential for the old stories to weave their way through contemporary lives to help instruct individuals in the ways of a “good life,” reminding us that memory is much more than the individual’s experience of what s/he did on her summer holidays. Memory lives and as Jeannette Armstrong reminds us in her poem “Threads of Old Memory” just as she is, the student writer is “the weaver of memory thread/twining past to future.”

Beyond the immediate world of physical experiences, McLeod also asks us to recall the spiritual dimension of experiences. In Northern places, the climate, the isolation, the distance between one community and another make it impossible not to consider the way the more-than-human communities influence places. On a nature walk around Yellowknife during Earth week 2010, Jamie Bastedo, local writer and environmentalist, said he likes to think of Northern localities as urban islands in the wilderness in contrast to Southern environments where nature is the island in urban localities.
On my many Northern walks, I have often felt that in spite of myself, and by this I mean in spite of my conscious awareness, the more-than-human world is relating to me and vice versa. David Abram’s metaphor for what I have sensed is “the body’s silent conversations with things” (1966, p. 49). I do not think very often about the ways the body that always accompanies my awareness provides multifaceted points of connection. Nor do I often reflect upon the “common field of our lives” (p.40) which always includes the more-than-human but which Abram characterizes as ambiguous and indeterminate “since our experience of this field is always relative to our situation within it” (p. 40). The phenomena of the field are experienced not just by me, of course, but by a multiplicity of sensing subjects. Abram, who has had experience in many Indigenous communities around the world, speaks of the way “humans, in an Indigenous and oral context, experience their own consciousness as simply one form of awareness among many others” (p. 9). It is difficult for me to shift my consciousness so that my subjective experience enables me to reconcile not only the reality of other selves but also other experiencing beings. Something I sense but cannot name has to be pared away so that I can recognize the ever shifting collective field of experience lived from many different perspectives.

**The animated word**

Abram’s view (1996) that “writing, like human language, is…born of the interplay and contact between the human and the more-than-human world” (p. 95) is an important reflection for teachers in Northern localities who are trying to animate the animated word. Abram invites us to consider how the suggestive scrawls and traces of the landscape may have lent themselves to the idea that became writing. Humans read the traces and tracks of the land before pictographic ideographic scripts were created; and now, the alphabet has displaced the emphasis on phenomena in the world and enscripted the importance of sound.
We are so immersed in our assumption that human relationships are primary and the rest of the world serves as a largely silent backdrop, Abram’s assertion that the blade of grass is an *experiencing* form is difficult to fathom. But just because we do not recognize the possibility for awareness, it doesn’t mean that that the possibility doesn’t exist. And many of us, deaf as we are to those voices, can still attest to the ability of beings in the more-than-human world to “instill a reverberation in oneself that temporarily shatters habitual ways of seeing” (p. 19). Students’ personal writing might restore the possibility to animate the written word in Northern localities when what is personal about personal writing is the qualia (the specific nature of our subjective experience of the world) of emplaced individual experience.

Qualia are partial and imprecise, embedded as they are in personal context and cannot be used to formulate any causal accounts for the phenomenal aspects of human consciousness. For David Lodge (2002) the method of lyric poetry is to “use language in such a way that the description of qualia does not seem partial, imprecise, and only comprehensible when put in the context of the poet’s personal life” (p. 12). This is the paradox of lyric writing that one can speak in the first person and not speak for oneself alone. This is achieved through “the thrill of recognition” (p. 12). Teachers can create writing practices that encourage students to explore the lyrical method. The purposes for this may not seem readily apparent in teaching systems that think in terms of teaching students the forms of writing that will help them fill future jobs. But if teachers can shift their focus to providing opportunities for students to explore their own minds, to the learning possibilities that could be developed when students choose the right words and phrasing to represent experience, to the learning about writing does and what the writer can do who can think about what readers require to be able to follow words on the page to imagine an experience then they might see some pedagogic value in writing practices that might prompt this kind of learning.
The qualia of my experience teaching in the North is central to the writing that is this dissertation. The anecdotes and poetics that appear are deliberately chosen. Over the four years that was my PhD program, I wrote many pieces in attempt to capture what Lodge calls “the density of experienced events” that narrative allows. Most of that writing is not in this dissertation, but those practices helped work out some of the snags in this dissertation and helped me chose the images and motifs and plot devices that would connect the sections in this dissertation.

The story, I am constructing here, does not always adhere faithfully to the actuality of all aspects of my experiences. There are repressions, glosses, and omissions. Daniel Dennett says, “Our fundamental tactic of self-protection, self-control, and self-definition is not spinning webs or building dams, but telling stories, and more importantly connecting and controlling the story we tell others—and ourselves—about who we are” (Dennett, as cited in Lodge, p. 15). But the repressions, glosses and omissions are also for the reader’s sake. I do not want readers to fold their arms and put their heads down on the desk anymore than I wanted my students to do so. The dissertation is a joint learning project. Although I cannot anticipate what the reader will make of what I have written, I have attempted to direct attention toward a few ideas and to steer attention away from ideas that I believe mire the possibilities for writing pedagogy in the NWT. I offer the reader the qualia of my experience hoping that s/he will hear the ring of recognition.
Chapter 9
Unafraid, Face-down, Flailing—Laying Down the Voice Path while Teaching

William Stafford (1978) asserts that what students need to learn about writing is “the value of unafraid, face-down, flailing, and speedy process using language” (p. 22). Student writers need to trust their capacity to find language to name their experiences. Stafford uses the analogy of swimming to show that just as any reasonable person can plainly see that water cannot hold a person up, a student’s experiences cannot sustain a piece of writing. “But swimmers know that if they relax on the water it will prove miraculously buoyant; and writers know that a succession of little strokes on the material nearest them—without any prejudgments about the specific gravity of the topic or the reasonableness of their expectations—will result in creative progress” (p. 22).

Unafraid, face-down flailing is necessary for the pedagogic orientation I will recommend in this chapter. As far as I know, no how-to guide book for this approach has been written. Teachers can gather ideas for writing practices from creative writing manuals and teacher practitioner texts on writing, but they will have to alter those practices according to, as Laurence from the study said, whatever it is they want students “to get at.” They will certainly need to think of practices in relation to other practices and conversation with and between students will be part of the process. In order to orient, this unafraid, face-down flailing, teachers need to focus their attention on developing the voices of their student writers. The expectation of this focus will not be that students will ‘find their voice’—as Stafford told us, most student writing will be flailing through language. The point is to remember that voice in writing matters. By focusing on voice, teachers will need to think about language as it comes from individual physical bodies. They will note how the same words differ, depending on who says them and how
they say them and this noticing might mean writing practices more attuned to place. For the students, a relaxing of the text-based approach which currently dominates writing instruction may mean less fearful, face-down flogging.

‘Inappropriate’ writing voices

My Grade 6 students and I were seated in chairs in a circle behind the rows of partnered desks. The heavy coats of a Northwest Territories classroom in winter crowded on hooks lined along the wall behind us. I had invited students to share some of their writing and our first volunteer read a story about an experience she’d had during the summer. Both of her parents were teachers in Fort Simpson. In the summer, her family drove 45 hours to their cottage near Parry Sound, Ontario and then back again before school started in the fall. She wrote about a day when she and her mother had taken their boat out on the lake. They had started out late and her mother was anxious to get back but Alice (not her real name) wanted to stop at the island as they habitually had done. For a reason I cannot recall, the mother waited in the boat while Alice made the hike up the rocky summit on her own. Very near the top, she slipped and scraped her leg badly. Blood oozed from the laceration as she called out for her mother who was too far away to respond. Alice’s voice shook as she read her story. Her classmate in the circle beside her reached over and patted her arm. Alice continued the story of her descent and subsequent bandaging in the boat. The story ended with her mother feeling bad while Alice, having recovered from her scare, recognized a sense of her growing independence. When Alice finished telling her story, we sat in silence for a while; her story was very well rendered and her confident voice had carried us with her through her journey to the top of that hill and down again. But as I gazed at the responsive faces of her audience, I couldn’t help but consider the ways that Alice’s story of what for her was a distressing event, was an appropriate story to tell in the school setting whereas the traumatic
stories of some of her classmates might not be. In Fort Simpson, sometimes we know about the traumas of one another’s lives because of court cases, public incidents, and gossip, so I was cognizant of the trying events that occurred in the lives of some of the other children in that circle. It struck me that the ways I was construing writing was somehow implying disclosure and might be threatening for some students.

It was not simply because their stories might disclose psychological vulnerabilities that I felt that many of my students were reluctant to try on the identity of writer. Writing can be threatening as it may open us up to realities we are not prepared to face. An additional barrier to considering oneself as a writer can be the difficulty of writing within parameters of safe, sanitized subject matter. In the pilot study, in a conversation that took up this idea, one teacher mentioned that she felt that students often tried to protect the “teacher’s innocence” by writing “nice stories” that won’t offend the teachers. Another teacher then described how frequently she encountered “don’t do drugs” papers in response to a school-wide writing prompt assignment. She suspected that students thought this was the kind of topic one should address in a persuasive essay although it may well be, that timed writings in evaluative settings automatically elicit the familiar themes of school literature. This teacher felt that the student’s lack of personal engagement and commitment to the topic led them to treat it superficially.

Once, at the end of a Grade 11 academic course, I decided to read aloud Guy Vanderhaeghe’s (1999) story “The Jimi Hendrix Experience,” a story about the mix of male adolescent menace and vulnerability that I found powerfully vital and disquieting all at the same time. At the end of the reading, a boy approached me and said: “I don’t really get that story, but I want to thank you for it. I have a sense that there is something going on in that story, something unlike the other stories we looked at in class.” It is hard to say whether he appreciated
Vanderhaeghe’s finesse as a writer as I did or whether he was responding to something else in the story.

None of my less engaged students ever articulated a reason for their resistance to writing so I really have only my felt sense that there might be tension between the apple trees world of school stories and the jack pine storied world of some of my students. I don’t want to diminish Alice’s experience nor her considerable prowess as a young writer, but as far as a school worldview (and I think there is one; it’s the one that is heralded by the use of the word “appropriate” before any number of possible human behaviors and characteristics) is concerned, her story of her growing independence was a good theme; the problem in the story was right for her age and had come to the required satisfying resolution. I didn’t think that all of my students’ stories would always be equally “appropriate.”

As another example of what might constitute “inappropriate,” many high school students are starting to think about the political stance they will take toward the events of their locale and the rest of the world. At a French language speech contest that I attended out of interest while in Yellowknife collecting my research, I heard a boy originally from Mali, West Africa, speak highly critically of the deportation policies in France. I wondered if, conscious or not, teachers who claim to be responsive to myriad viewpoints might have heard his tone as angry and his form as polemic and try to correct it. Once, in 1986, in my first year of teaching in a small rural town in Ontario, a little girl from an outlying farm shared with me before class that one of the cats had had kittens on the weekend. “Oh, really?” I asked. “Yep,” she answered and then declared without a note of wishfulness or poignancy that her dad had put them in a bag and “drownded them in the pond.” “Hmmm, yes,” I responded, thinking that she’d soon learn not to tell that story in school.
Beyond perspectives in need of revising, I’m not sure that some of my students would be able to tell stories in the syntax, diction and imagery of the storybooks they encountered in school. The spoken English of many of my students held traces of the Dene language and even of the French language from the Belgian missionaries who had staffed the Catholic residential school for many years. If some students dared to write their stories, those stories might not be told in the rhythms and cadences of school-sanctioned English. For some, a history of limited practice in writing could also mean stories laced through with grammar and spelling mistakes that might impede the reader’s progress. The word choices and the images of many Northern students might come from the many interrelationships that occur with, between, and among many emplaced voices including digital voices along with the voices of the people of the community and region. Most Western cultures have long divorced themselves from the possibilities of hearing “the voices” of the land and I cannot possibly rekindle the relationship in this chapter. Nevertheless, even without conscious awareness, I believe that the voices of the more-than-human world functions does influence the human voices constituted in place.

The traditional territory of Dene families was, and is for some still today, considered a “power base” for the individual who comes from that place. In the rhetoric of many Dene leaders, the land is still seen as constitutive of Dene identity and many of the difficulties that Dene people face today are related to their removal from the places to which they belong. Dislocation, for others in the North, is also a Northern reality as the particular locations that make meaning for them may be elsewhere or “back home” and not the place where they now reside for reasons of work. For others, who may not connect to a particular location, a generic sense of dislocation may be a part of contemporary mobile life; perhaps for still others a new identity as a cosmopolitan citizen doesn’t require a connection to any particular location.
These conceptions of one’s relation to place affect the attitude one takes to the places where one is and consequently, to the voices one consciously tries on and takes up. Just as place influences individual identity, whether one is conscious of it or not, place influences aspects of voice whether one recognizes it or not. I cannot count, over the years, the number of people who have asked whether I have Irish background in response to hearing my spoken voice. My maternal grandfather was a second-generation Irish Protestant who had worked to remove his accent. Although I was very fond of him, his influence on my life was fairly minimal in that we only visited him twice a year and he died when I was 13. Whether traces lived on in my mother’s language and I picked it up there, or whether I picked up traces from fourth-generation settlers in Galway and Cavendish County, the place where I grew up, or whether what people are hearing is traces I have picked up from many Northern colleagues who are originally from Newfoundland, I cannot say. According to my sisters, no one has ever commented on an Irish aspect to their spoken voice, so whatever has transpired in the constitution of my spoken voice differs in the way that I have been in relation to the ‘placeness’ of many of the same localities as my sisters and to localities that we do not share in common. What people hear in my voice may also have to do with the audience who hears it because I have never been asked by an Irish person whether I am of Irish decent.

**My previous pedagogic stances toward writing**

Specific pedagogies acknowledging the importance of student voice do not always consider the many influences on voices since they take up one orientation to voice and omit others. Alternatively, teachers can hold competing views of voice in their approaches to writing pedagogy. In the writing workshop approach to teaching writing (Atwell, 1987; Calkins, 1986) that I took up early in my teaching, proponents propose the emergence of a written form of
student voice through student writers’ expression of ideas that they care about and through their use of language and style that conveys their commitment. Writing workshop classrooms feature a degree of decentralized control, as student writers make a range of agency decisions by choosing topics, purpose, forms, audience, and time frames for completion. Students also provide input for one another while the teacher meets one-on-one with student writers and hosts whole class or small group “mini lessons” around topics of concern that have cropped up for significant numbers of students.

When I taught high school, I took up this conception of “voice as individual expression,” but I also held the view that certain “voices” are silenced by “the mainstream.” Snaza and Lensmire (2006) characterize this conception of voice as one that stems from critical pedagogies and thinks about voice as participation. Elbow (2007) points to the anti-elitist stance of both positions. I contend that the conception of the self in each is fundamentally different: the self in critical pedagogy is a social self while the self in expressivist pedagogies is “stable, unitary and autonomous” (Snaza and Lensmire, 2006, p. 2).

Beyond the paradox that existed within the competing conceptions of voice that I held, neither conception embeds student voice in the immediate social context of the classroom. To this critique I would add the importance of considering the placeness of the immediate social context of a classroom, embedded as it is in a particular locality in relation, as that place always is, to other places. For workshop advocates, voice is embedded in the inner context of the author’s intentions and desires within a friendly supportive environment. Critical pedagogues embed writing in larger historical and political contexts and ignore the micropolitics and microhistories of classrooms in particular locations. In neither case are students’ writing voices conceptualized as dynamic and in-process.
The possibility for voice in the landscape of writing pedagogies

I concur with the criticism by social constructionist theorists that it is not helpful to think of voice as the unique representation of one person’s creative vision. While I concede that context and community shape meaning in ways far more powerful that any aspect of an individual’s voice (Johnson & Pace, 2005), I do not believe that even the least confident student writer is completely at the mercy of forces outside of her control. Snaza and Lensmire (2006) draw on Bakhtin and conceives of voice as “a project involving appropriation, social struggle, and becoming” (p. 3). The self is not without agency, passive in front of social and cultural forces; rather, the self does the work of drawing on and from the resources to craft a voice.

For Snaza and Lensmire (2006) there are three struggles for the student writers as they craft a voice. The first is investing words and structures of a given tradition with meaning that is adequate for the students’ goals for expression, given the demands of the writing situation that confronts them. The second is to satisfy the audiences who will read, including the teacher who may mark the piece and the peers who may also be involved and desire different things. (I think of the fight scene writing of the junior and intermediate boys I knew in the late 80s—“kowabunga writing” I used to call it, out of deference for the teenage mutant ninja turtles that served as inspiration. The writing, featuring keenly placed high kicks to an enemy’s groin delivered by heroes with the same names as the writer’s friends, was very meaningful to the boys but considerably less so to me). The third struggle occurs as the student writer chooses words within asymmetries of power that, in Fort Simpson, went beyond teacher-student relations and peer influence to the complex historic-political nature of the community where we lived. Voice in writing begins with the possibility of becoming that emerges from the struggle to please self and others, self and the land, self in relation to other places and to the web of life itself. Ultimately,
even the least confident student writer can learn to stand with and against the words of others and with and against the storied possibilities of places.

Although voice is a controversial term in composition studies, I think it is a useful term in teaching young people in schools to write. As complex as the concept can become at the theoretical level, readers intuitively recognize and respond to voice when interpreting texts (Elbow, 2008). Although much work has been done to indicate how writing is not like speech (Ong, 1982), the term voice throws us back into that debate over the relationship between the two. Voice is an embodied metaphor. Embodied comparisons are often made between the distinctiveness of a person's speaking voice and the expressive nature of a written voice—I can experiment with my speaking voice but am limited by my vocal chords; I wonder if the range of possibilities for exploration is greater in experimentation in my written voice (Alvarez, 1996). Student writers struggle to make something new out of the old in writing and may experience writing as the movement through difficulty and triumph (however fleeting). In writing there is a possibility for renewing perspectives on the world and reconstructing our places within it. To reduce the teaching of writing to primarily one of procedural knowledge of texts may deny this opportunity, although some students may very well come to voice on their own in spite of a text-based focus for the teaching of writing.

According to Elbow (2008) in their root literal senses, “text” stands for words on a page and “voice” for the spoken medium of language. Thus, an emphasis on the text highlights the visual and spatial features of language as print (etymologically, “text” comes from weaving—note “textile”); an emphasis on voice highlights language as sounded, heard, and existing in time. Focusing pedagogy on text foregrounds language as an abstract system (Saussure's langue) in which words have the same meaning whoever utters them in whatever context; focusing on voice
highlights how language issues from individual persons and physical bodies and notes how the same words differ, depending on who says them and how.

**Voice and the relationship between reading and writing**

The irony of the spoken medium of written language is that it is conveyed visually on the page or screen. If “voice is the magical heard quality in writing” (Don Murray as cited in Romano (2004) p. 10) constructed by an illusionist who knows the tricks of other people’s reading minds, then voice in writing requires a relationship between a reader and a writer. If voice is the quality that connects the reader to the text, then it is in a writer’s best interest to learn how to seduce the would-be reader into believing. If the writer’s voice is brought to life by the reader’s ear, then developing writers will have to learn to develop their reader’s ear.

Elbow (2008) claims that there are five aspects to voice. There is the audible voice, which is the sound of the silent words on the page that comes about because reader projects aurally speech sounds onto the text. Readers usually experience “audible” voiced writing as clearer than writing they don’t hear. We are conditioned, Elbow claims, to hear words, so the question to ask is “Why don’t we hear some texts?” Elbow’s answer is that words are easy when we have frequently heard their cadences because they are characteristic of idiomatic speech; unskilled writers may make it difficult for a reader to hear a coherent voice in their writing because they stop so frequently as to lose the threaded sound. Elbow contends that Western traditions have worked hard to make a distinction between speech and writing such that more formal contexts demand writing that is not voiced. For him, a culture that wants to keep speech qualities out of writing favors a voiceless, faceless text in which the authority for the content comes from everywhere and nowhere specific. Gee (2006) argues that academic prose is not without voice, but rather the detached voice of erudite scholarship is a specific kind of voice.
Elbow contends that another aspect of voice is its dramatic aspect. By this he means the reader infers character: a confident voice, for example, implies the possibility that the speaker is confident. This recognition will be important for students on the Alberta Diploma Examinations, where a “confident voice” merits a score of excellence on the exam sections: personal and critical responses to literature. I have often wondered about cultural differences in that “confident voice.”

The paradox in writing is that although the dramatic aspect of voice is not “me,” it feels like “me,” and often the perspectives, the approaches to the writing, and the subject matter are important to the writer. I am vulnerable when I read only if I share my opinions and feelings about the text I am reading. However, when I write, I feel vulnerable, not only because of the aspects that I have consciously shared but because I fear that aspects of my subjective experience might have escaped through the writing, revealing more about “me” than I intended. Writing may become easier as learners develop familiarity and skill with different materials and forms of expression and learn how to manipulate and play with language.

Voices can also be recognizable or distinctive, Elbow contends, and this may be the aspect that three teachers in the *Northernvoices* study referred to when they identified voice with “specific personalities” they saw “coming out in the writing.” Updike claims that if the writer finds the material, voice will take care of itself. While this may be true for an experienced writer, I suspect there is more to it for a junior/intermediate and even a high school writer. Elbow warns against encouraging a student to develop a distinctive voice since he believes it leads to overwriting; instead, he urges teachers to help students develop a comfortable fluency.

A fourth aspect of voice is the authority to wield influence or as Elbow says: “Write with a mind of our own that is willing to offend” (p. xxxiii). I believe this is a difficult challenge for many confident writers, let alone less confident ones, but I agree that this aspect is part of voice. I also feel that this emphasis is particularly important for some Northern writers for the political
reasons that I have outlined elsewhere in this dissertation. Voice is embedded in the way the writer perceives and in the subject matter that the writer chooses, as the many participants in the study who linked voice and perspective recognized. Eric asked students to look at their texts “from a different angle to see the possibility of a different voice.” Students bring “their judgments and interpretations to bear on what they read and write, learning that they never leave themselves behind” asserts (Sommers, 1993, as cited in Romano (2004) p. 660). Julia Cameron (2002) acknowledges that what we see and how we see is crucial to voice because “visual detail propels our voices” (p. 134). Voice and point of view are both expressions of Bakhtin’s polyphonic perspective. We cannot fully understand voice “who speaks” unless we also understand point of view “who sees” (Boulter, 2007, p. 148).

And finally, we arrive at the fifth aspect of voice that is Elbow’s most controversial assertion. He says that resonance or presence is an aspect of voice. His position, he says, does not assume any particular theory of the self and the self’s relation to the text; what the reader hears is a resonance with his or her own predilections, tastes, perspectives and obsessions. He argues that the reader makes inferences between the fit of the voice in the text and the unknown historical writer; by this Elbow means we listen/read to determine whether we can trust the speaker/writer and we trust the speaker/writer if we think the voice is believable. Readers draw inferences from the writer’s syntax, diction and stances; they evaluate the truthfulness and validity of what is said by how it is said. When I asked Eric whether he heard a “Willowtown voice” in his students’ writing, he said he did “in the way they form sentences and in the words they use.” In the February pilot, one of the participants indicated that she wanted to ensure that students “keep their cultural voice” in writing. Despite that Rosenblatt’s reader response theory (1978) has made it clear that the knowledge and perspectives of individual readers shape interpretation, I still empathize with the concern expressed by this teacher and am hopeful that a writing pedagogy that
includes a focus on voice might allow more diversity in the possible expression of voices in schools.

**Voice and confidence**

All of the teachers but one in this study expressed confidence in their ability to write. Liz indicated that it was nice to be writing again after she had been a way for it for so long and said she “felt a small sense of accomplishment at the end.” Margaret wrote about what she was learning about herself as a writer in this study, but set her new understandings against the backdrop of what she already knew. The teacher/writers made choices about genre based on what they knew about the form’s potential to express what they wanted to say, but also based on their track record. Some said they chose what they liked to work in and sometimes they challenged themselves. They were often, if not always, reflecting on their experience and then wondering how this might affect their pedagogy and they often considered what writing means for people who are not confident. “[G]etting them to buy into the writing is the tough part. A hesitant writer will hesitate no matter the material or the freedom given. Freedom can mean more for them to sift through and that in itself causes them to balk….It is a case of finding out what works and running with it,” Eric said in one MSN conversation.

Over and over, teachers mentioned the importance of building confidence with all of their writers. Luce-Kapler, Catlin, Sumara, & Kocher (2011) “Voice is a synecdoche for the expressive confidence that comes from recognizing that what one thinks and believes is worthy of attention” (p. 162). Laurence has had the opportunity to co-create a writing room where interested strong writers are encouraged to develop assurance in their writing abilities. When questioned about confidence destroyers, he suggested that one requires a great deal of confidence in order to critique one’s peers and suggested that this was not a good model for most students; in his writing
room model, high-school-aged students work with junior high students. Building confidence in all student writers is crucial but may be paramount in Indigenous places where:

“As the process of educational reform continues, it is imperative that researchers understand the structure of doubt the Canadian educational system has generated among Aboriginal people …The self-doubt it has generated within Aboriginal students has made them discount their inherent capacities and gifts” (Battiste, 2002, p. 27).

When teachers are concerned about providing opportunities for students to develop voice in their writing they may ask students to experiment with voice. For many of the participants in the Northernvoices study, voice was not fixed but rather was developing or was something composed of many voices. Eric asks his students to “try on voices” and related an experience with a successful piece of writing when “a student once wrote in the voice of a ptarmigan that played quite a small role in the story [they had studied in class]” Many of the participants used practices that asked students to imitate voices. Ironically, Romano (2004) tells us imitation can “cut loose a voice and let writers experience the power that comes with a little recklessness, a little letting go of the self and learning the language rhythms and voice habits of another” (p. 101). When asked if they think in terms of “developing student writing voices,” some of the teachers said they did and Eric mentioned that he tries “to see how far [his students] will let [him] experiment.”

Developing student voice in writing was linked to practices that allowed students to “vent, create, experiment or reflect.” “Specific situated topics” were also identified as important to the voice-developing process (teachers set the constraints, students worked within these to identify a specific situated topic). As Laurence put it: “General topics may get general responses”: voice, it was insinuated, is created through specifics. When teachers spoke about important practices that helped to develop voice, they mentioned free writes and journaling
because through these practices, they felt students might take on topics that “they otherwise feel uncomfortable saying.” The word creativity cropped up numerous times in the study and was used in many ways, although quite often it was used to suggest the openness in assignments that allows for unanticipated possibilities. Quick writes and journaling represented this openness because these practices moved students away from obsessing about getting the form right. Romano says that “form should be a voice giver, not a voice taker” (p. 59), but it is not always this way in schools.

The teachers also recommended asking students to read their work aloud as a practice that would help develop voice. Elbow (2000) says that when students have the repeated experience of reading their writing aloud, they are more likely to listen to their words and write sentences that are inviting and comfortable to speak, which, in turn, makes the sentences better for readers reading in silence. Students may also read aloud the work of published authors and teachers may help draw their attention to what writers do. Confident student writers may analyze the voice in a lot of texts and by reading drafts aloud—and trying out different readings to manipulate the voice in various ways—they can learn to anticipate voices that readers are most likely to hear. Elbow adds that “it’s particularly important to learn to hear the voice or voices that readers won’t consciously hear but that may well affect their reaction” (p. 177).

Some teachers asked students to “re-see” aspects of a work, rewriting parts of an expository text or poem from another perspective, writing a sketch of a character in a short story, highlighting the sensory details in a descriptive piece and then reworking that details in another form. Teachers saw possibility for student conversations during these practices; they also saw discussion as helpful to revision especially since they said they stressed over and over to their students that revision required a consideration of more than the mechanics of writing. Teachers felt that “raw voice” might appear in first-draft writing, but a mature voice is only developed
through revision. Talking through a piece of writing might help, although many teachers said they encountered major resistance to any type of revision. Annette talked about success with collaborative writing where students were more likely to see revision as a class exercise with which they engaged. She surmised that when students were individually less invested and she did the actual moving around of text they were more likely to talk through revision.

The outcome of directing the students’ attention to voice in writing is not that all students will emerge from Grade 12 with an identifiable writer’s voice; rather the teacher orients aspects of his or her writing pedagogy toward practices that privilege this development. Like Elbow, I believe that there is something personally significant and political at stake if the voice you recognize in your writing “sounds like” you, even if you only ever catch glimpses of that possibility. In places where the learning spirit of students has been diminished writing pedagogy that is directed by a concern for the expression of multiple viewpoints in the rhetorical manner that best fits these viewpoints may serve to rekindle the desire for learning.

**Getting voice right**

On the last writing workshop on the wiki, I asked participants to write in the voice of one of their students. Participants said that they found this difficult. Laurence solved the problem by eavesdropping until a chance exchange served as an interesting found text. Eric and I resorted to mimicking the voice of the student in our class who stood out the most. I was teaching B.Ed. students at the time, so I tried to write in the voice of one of my students. Examining my finished product I was conscious of how little sense I had of her voice; what I captured seemed like a caricature of the young woman I knew. Believability in the writing voice comes from more than a good ear and the ability to pay attention. Some aspects of spoken language like idiomatic speech make their way into writing but rhythmic and poetic characteristics which are not always a part of
orality can curiously sound like the spoken medium of language in writing. The signaling of a speech act is also something that occurs in writing. In my dissertation, many of the academic voices “say” the points I have taken out of the original textual context to make a point in my own. Sometimes text appears to be an enactment of thinking going on rather than a record of completed thinking.

In a 2008 research project into the relationship between voice and consciousness conducted by Rebecca Luce-Kapler (2011), three authors noted how difficult it is to convey dialogue between characters that sounds like real dialogue. One look at a transcript of a taped oral conversation illustrates how written dialogue in literary fiction is not at all like speech written down; it seems that writers like Hemingway, who are adept at conveying dialogue, are good at conveying what the reader thinks conversation sounds like. These imagined voices in conversation have fewer elisions, stops and starts; the writer has already done for the reader what the speaker must do in the moment of conversation; that is, create coherent threads out of fragments, elisions, hints, associations and personal interpretations of figurative language. But the reader won’t engage in this activity if there is too much ‘wrong’ with the characters’ voices. My students, over the years, were often amazed by a writer’s capacity to get the voice right for an adolescent. For example, they used to question how Kit Pearson, a young adult fiction writer many young women in the Yellowknife classes enjoyed, successfully imagined the mind, experiences, and voice of an adolescent girl. Presumably their experience of reading was one of being so engrossed in the book that the surprise that the creator of the text had not had similar experiences, ideas and ways of speaking (at least recently) hadn’t occurred to them until they reflected on their experience afterwards.

When I think of the ability to get voice right, I think of friends who took on the not-so politically correct task of mimicking the accents and phrasings of the place where they grew up.
Not everyone can do it well, but the experts among those who take this on draw the most laughter often by putting the voice of that place in an incongruous situation. Those voices draw on what might be called stereotype, which is a type of shorthand for the listener’s sake, but also include some new idiomatic expressions, turns of phrases or word choices to make the voice ‘authentic.’ Fiction writers, too, are charged with the task of making many voices sound as if they come from a specific place in addition to the task of conveying believable dialogue between characters.

Through diction, syntax, images, idiom, subject matter and perspective, writer Richard Van Camp who is Tlicho and originally from Fort Smith in the Northwest Territories, conveys very believable dialogue in his highly acclaimed first novel *The Lesser Blessed* a story set in “Fort Simmer” a fictional regional center in the southern Northwest Territories. In his newest book of short stories (2009) the *Moon of Letting Go*. He opens the third story in that collection with:

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I guess how we got this whole thing started was I was sitting at the trailer one night thinking about Justin, thinking about his life. There was this article they ran in the Community News a few years back where his folks announced that Justin had graduated with honours from Aurora College in Yellowknife. There was a picture of him smiling away with his big glasses and puffy hair just as proud as could be, and I remember raising a glass for him. Even though I never went away for schoolin’ or ever really travelled, I remember feeling happy that someone was putting Fort Smith on the map. (p.19)
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One of the activities we undertook in the April face-to-face writing workshop was a characterization of our writing voices. I printed off the writing practices and asked Eric, Laurence and Margaret to notice aspects of their writing and then to share what they thought about their writing voices. Participants reported enjoying the activity. I suspect that ‘strong’ student writers have given some thought to just what it is they do in their writing to create this strong voice (or voices). Years ago when I had a very strong intermediate writer, I underlined parts of her writing in pencil. I told her what I thought she was doing in her writing and asked her how she knew to
do that. She told me that she noticed what writers did and tried to copy some of their techniques. I had a similar conversation with a student who had a very extensive vocabulary that she brought to oral conversations in class. Like the young writer mentioned previously, this young woman was an avid reader who noticed words in writers’ texts, but she said she also listened in on conversations both to pick up good words and to hear how they were pronounced and used. Both of these students spoke with obvious delight about the task that was becoming a strong writer or acquiring an extensive working vocabulary. Obviously, they were selecting some words over others. Perhaps the delight comes in finding new words that might sound like a word they would use. Voice work involves the opportunity to define oneself and locate oneself within existing discourses by appropriating and rewriting the voices of others. While most student writers will not be conscious of the intertextual nature of their writing, teachers of writing need to be. With this awareness, they can set up the conditions that will allow students’ writing to flourish.

**Teaching writing as though voice matters**

Voice in writing matters. As complex as the concept can become at the theoretical level, readers intuitively recognize and respond to voice when interpreting texts. But it is impossible to pinpoint exactly whose voice is being represented; Bakhtin (1981) tells us that beyond the writer, there are many echoes and allusions referring deliberately or not to the language of others. In the Bakhtinian polyphony of layers of multiple voicing, voices are constituted through their relationships in place. This includes the many interrelationships among many voices including digital voices on online chats, voices in the print they read and voices in the oral histories of places. These interrelated voices will be reflected in the content, perspective and in the manner in which stories, poems and positions are expressed in the student writers’ voice.
No one should be tempted any more to take a narrow, nonhistorical or nonrhetorical view as the only lens for language practices. In the *Northernvoices* study, Margaret noted the difference in the expectation in many schools today in that voice is important to develop. She claimed that when she was in school students were expected to create voiceless writing, that is “writing that anyone could have written”—this was the hallmark of excellence in writing at that time.”

Neither Elbow nor I recommend that teachers abandon teaching through text-based approaches. Student writers need both text and voice approaches. Many teachers, I suspect, especially in the current love affair we are having with something called “explicit teaching” may eshew the “voice lens” metaphor that Elbow offers. I understand the impulse to put up a diagram of the five paragraph essay and explain step-by-step with examples just exactly what it is students are supposed to do. I would not blame anyone for the initial trepidation in face of the call for teachers to create writing practices for students that invite the development of their voices especially since I do not teaching voice as one more trait in writing but rather as an orientation that the teacher will bring to her writing pedagogy. At least with the approach that teaches voice as one more feature in a text-based approach to writing, there are plenty of commercially produced teacher resources from which to draw.

The orientation to pedagogy that suggests that teachers bear in mind possibilities for developing students’ voices in writing, may very well offer some of the same learning opportunities as the ones that Culahm (2003) and Romano (2004) have suggested when they have produced resources to help teachers teach voice. It may well lead to writing prose that “has a voice” or “sounds like a person,” prose that, as a result, will be more effective at carrying meaning since “[i]ntonation or prosody *enacts* some of the meanings so that we can ‘hear’ them” (Elbow, p. 176). I am less concerned that students ever know very much about voice and writing:
I am more concerned that teachers know so that they can compose writing practices with this understanding in mind.

The practices that I am advocating are not procedural approaches to composing a piece of writing “with voice.” Instead, I recommend a pedagogy that emerges out of attention to what students are doing or could do in their writing in terms of the content, perspectives and the manner in which ideas might take shape or be expressed in the places where they live and write. Through this orientation, I privilege the possibilities for emplaced writing over emphasis on reproducing forms, emulating appropriate tones and paying close attention to the ‘correct’ conventions of standardized writing.

**Oriented towards voice, teachers make their way**

Just as student writers must learn to relax and reach out to what is around them in their immediate environment, so too must their teachers. Teachers of writing require an orientation to writing that will allow them to think of student writing as more than “standing reserve,” to use one of Bate’s metaphors, for technical corrections. Teachers can learn more about teaching writing when they approach writing, even the error-laden writing of their students, in the spirit of the intermediate student I had who looks at writing to see what she can learn both about writing and also about teaching writing. They can try some of their own writing practices, perhaps with colleagues and they can set Lucy McCormick Calkin’s assignment to think like a writer in the place where they teach. What would they notice and how might it affect the writing practices they set for their students?

Students don’t need to concern themselves with most of what teachers learn about the voices in the place where they teach. What they need is plenty of time to create joint learning projects around language, experience other writer’s language and play through free-writes, for
example, from the kinds of generative prompts the teachers and playing with voices that don’t sound like oneself and taking on perspectives one doesn’t hold. Perhaps by drawing student attention to some of the things they do while they write—asking them to think about their writer moves instead of always asking them to notice what we already know in advance (the features of genres and forms, the format of the five paragraph essay and the correct place for a topic sentence), we could circumvent the plodding regularity that happens when people sit down deliberately to begin constructing a text. Annalies Pool, a Yellowknife writer at the 2011 Northwords festival, spoke of her experience working with excellent oral storytellers who asked her to coach them to get their stories down in “writing,” she said laughing and making scare quotes. She was amazed at how a once lively, story became: “On Thursday, March 30th, I…” Her words made me think of the characters in student writing described in terms of their height, weight and hair color. I was polite when I worked with those students, but it might have been fun to ask: “How tall is Pi in The Life of Pi? How much does Macbeth weigh? What color is Scout’s hair in To Kill a Mockingbird? Annalies didn’t blame teachers for whatever writing in scare quotes is, but I suspect that we may have to hold ourselves accountable for some of it.
Chapter 10

The Outline of a Dissertation

“Those who, like us, confess the humility of our condition should not be left to shiver through the night of truth alone” (Caputo, 2000, p. 17).

Re-introduction: The outline of an island

When I arrive in Fort Simpson in August, 1987, I walk around the outer edges of the island beginning my off-road journey at the causeway that connects the town to the mainland. The causeway crosses over the low, still water that winds its way around the island before rejoining the two powerful rivers at the north end. The land has been engineered to be higher here, so I must skid my way down a short gravelly path probably made by runoff in the spring. I walk through a bit of willow and alder bush before meeting up with the wild raspberries canes and aspen that ring the overflow campground that was established for the Pope’s visit in 1984. I push through to the campground road not knowing that years later a bear will amble behind me on this same path and I will instantly reconcile myself to tying up my beloved dog if the bear seems interested in eating me. But I have no dog on that first day as I walk around what will one day become the town’s golf course. I stop to speculate that the clearing at the snye once had more human traffic than it does now because I notice abandoned wooden dog houses soon to be overtaken by the encroaching bush. Later I will learn that people used to run sled dogs. I notice other structures that hint at a government-funded idea for an experimental yak farm, but, on the first day, I do not know about this story yet and simply wonder about previous human use in this place. I head into the patch of old-growth black spruce forest that is still left on the island. I walk the skinny, root encumbered paths through thin-crusted trees hanging with long lichen until I reach the grasses at the far end of the town’s air strip. I brush the seeds off the grasses as I have
done since I was a child but the grasses and sedges are sharp so I have to pay attention. Some years, the grasshoppers are bountiful, others almost absent. This first August they are the most numerous I would ever see, clicking against my legs as I go. In time, I won’t be able to walk anywhere without knowing that the ravens I hear are eyeing up a garbage bin somewhere in town, while some of their compatriots are wafting in the updrafts at the end of the island. But on the first trip, I don’t know because I haven’t heard or seen them often enough.

Past the air strip and some ramshackle out-buildings, I rejoin the road that runs through town, which by this time (but of course it is not ‘by this time’ but rather ‘by this location’) has become a one-lane rosy, dirt road as most of the town’s homes and businesses and government buildings—Aboriginal, territorial, and federal lie behind me. Now at the north end of the island, I walk past a few unlived-in log houses falling to ruin and another well-kept house lived in as a base camp by an older couple and their grandson. From their home, where it is positioned, they have easy access to the water as the banks are much lower at this end of the island. Finally, I reach the mucky, mud flats but decide not to continue my journey across the wet islands of river sand, but return toward town along the shore which quickly turns from mud to muddy rock to large bare rocks as one makes one’s way. There are paths up and down the steep bank, at numerous points along my return, made by people who are going to the wooden scows or 16 foot aluminum boats they keep tethered at the river. Using the willow as handholds, I make my way back up one of the trails and continue along the well-worn path on the river bank meeting many of the townspeople who are out strolling. At the south end of the island there is a bench, which I will learn is often occupied by elders, but today is free. I sit down to look at the two rivers that meet in this place.

Closest to the bank where I am sitting is the murky, muddy brown Naechag’ah that meets here after its journey from the Yukon and on the other side of that river is the mighty Dehcho, the
river that runs north into the Arctic Ocean. In spring, I watch the trees that have been uprooted
during the spring run-off; the river is fast in the spring and large trees disappear completely out of
sight as violent currents yank them under and then plop them back on the surface again. In the
summer, I have to be prepared to swat mosquitoes as I sit, but I am not as bothered by bugs as
some people are—a little spray of a children’s bug repellent often is enough for me.

Every summer, the river is different. Sometimes, there is a huge beach on the papal flats end of the island, sometimes there isn’t. The drum circle, a large wooden structure of bleachers with a fire pit in the middle was built during the 1987 visit of Pope John Paul II and enjoyed for years afterward at community celebrations. In 1984, the plane carrying Pope John Paul II was unable to land, but he returned three years later to make a covenant with Aboriginal people. At least that’s how his visit was characterized by some people. For others, it was a political event and for still others, the celebration marked something to do in an otherwise sleepy, little town. A large teepee open at the front and built on a wooden platform with broad steps leading up to it was built as a place for the Pope to give his historical mass. Soon after, the canvas was taken down and the chair, made especially for his visit, was taken to the territorial museum. Teens sit talking, their legs dangling off the edge or children race up and down the steps and play on the wooden, elevated surface. A stone, beaver lodge monument erected in honor of his visit, remains at the beginning of the stone path that leads to the teepee. At the far end of ‘the papal flats’ is the baseball diamond and in behind the cleared area I have just described, is the town’s campground where tourists stay in the summer season and which residents use for cookouts.

In fall, sometimes I sat on the bench, but not for long as fall begins to get chilly. The surface of both rivers shines deceptively still as they reflect the fall colors—mostly shades of gold in this part of Canada. I am used to the full range of colours in a Halliburton Highlands’ fall. The only red along the banks of the Dehcho is the thin, line of willow leaves, which does not compare
to the dazzling, full-bodied red of the sugar maple I know. In the winter in Fort Simpson, I walked along the river bank on paths worn down by snowmobiles. The river does not freeze flat on the surface of those powerful rivers; there are often protruding triangles of ice rising up from the horizontal. Only once did I snowmobile on that river because I didn’t enjoy the focus required to drive my way through the heavy crusts of ice. More seasoned skidoosers fare much better than I, but on that first day in mid August sitting on the bench before I knew any of this, the only traffic on the river is the buzz of one small boat, heading somewhere I cannot imagine after the family of travelers has loaded their packs and supplies at the bottom of the hill where I sit.

It is the beginning of a northern fall; the leaves are tinged at the edges with yellow, and the purple swallows dart in and out of their dusty, hard holes in the grey brown bank. I am surrounded by the pungent odor of the diamond willow whose pliant roots help to keep the eroding bank in place for a few sparse alders. A line from Yeat’s pops into my head, “A terrible beauty is born;” it is the only response I can muster, at the time.

**The Researcher: Giving an account of oneself (Butler, 2005)**

…the narrative “I” is reconstituted at every moment it is evoked in the narrative itself (p.66).

Yet there is no “I” that can fully stand apart from the social conditions of its emergence, no “I” that is not implicated in a set of conditioning norms, which, being norms, have a social character that exceeds a purely personal or idiosyncratic meaning. The “I” does not stand apart from the prevailing matrix of ethical norms and conflicting moral frameworks. In an important sense, this matrix is also the condition for the emergence of the “I,” even though the “I” is not causally induced by those norms. We cannot conclude that the “I” is simply the effect of the instrument of some prior ethos or some field of conflicting or discontinuous norms. When the “I” seeks to give an account of itself, it can
start with itself, but it will find that this self is already implicated in a social temporality that exceeds its own capacities for narration; indeed, when the “I” seeks to give an account of itself, an account that must include the conditions of its own emergence, it must, as a matter of necessity, become a social theorist (p.7/8).

The reason for this is that the “I” has no story of its own that is not also the story of a relation—or set of relations—to a set of norms. Although many contemporary critics worry that this means there is no concept of the subject that can serve as the ground for moral agency and moral accountability, that conclusion does not follow. The “I” is always to some extent dispossessed by the conditions of its emergence. This dispossession does not mean that we have lost the subjective ground for ethics. On the contrary, it may well be the condition for moral inquiry, the condition under which morality itself emerges (p.14).

Giving an account thus takes a narrative form, which not only depends upon the ability to relay a set of sequential events with plausible transitions but also draws upon narrative voice and authority, being directed toward an audience with the aim of persuasion (p.20).

…the narrative “I” is reconstituted at every moment it is evoked in the narrative itself (p.66).

An ability to affirm what is contingent and incoherent in oneself may allow one to affirm others who may or may not “mirror” one’s own constitution (p.41).

If letting the other live is part of any ethical definition of recognition, then this version of recognition will be based less on knowledge then on an apprehension of epistemic limits (p.45).

…the narrative “I” is reconstituted at every moment it is evoked in the narrative itself (p.66).
The contrasts and contradictions in the study

I was in Yellowknife in June 2011 and took in the NorthWords writers’ festival. When Bill Braden, a local “recovering politician,” business man, and former journalist was asked, as a member of a four writer panel on writing history, how one deals with the contrasts and contradictions one finds in primary sources. He responded: “the contrasts and the contradictions are the story.” Charlotte Gray, visiting author, who was also on the panel, agreed with him and then added that she felt responsible for finding a way to hold all of those contrasts and contradictions together in a narrative. Both responses resonated with me as I felt that this was very much the work not only of this dissertation, but also of the Northernvoices project and even before that of the lived reality of teaching in northern places.

Repurposing the study

We newcomers may never grasp, that place is “integral to the very structure and possibility of experience” (italics in original, Malpas, 1999, p. 32). Localities can be experienced like tourist destinations ‘in the global village’ only by ignoring the ‘being in’ of place. For Kulnieks, Roronhiakewen, Longboat, and Young (2010) “eco-hermeneutics” based on Indigenous traditions seek “to tell and interpret stories that are Indigenous to the places [people] live” (p. 17). The authors challenge the privileging of texts over places in hermeneutics pointing to the contributions of Indigenous knowledge holders who use the land as their primary source for understanding.

Your maps old woman

My people do not share your aversion to spatial containment

To demarcating dynamics

Your maps, old woman,
Are oral archives inscribed in land lines on your body
pointing the way through a boundless universe—mythic, spatial, actual and temporal
Your maps old woman are interpretations, not measurements
never distorted by fixing location
Your maps are topographic remembrance
living histories of place, born of listeners borne in places
shifting for as long as the sun shines, the rivers flow, and the grass grows
and forever is right here
But, your maps, old woman
May seem as nothing to the wide mind of powerful misunderstanding

Reconsidering the history of NWT education: The history of education in my family

I don’t know very much about my ancestors. I know that my paternal great great
grandfather came from Germany. I don’t know where he came from in Germany, or why he left,
but I know that he and a brother went to Wisconsin where there was some kind of rift and then he
came to Canada. He had cattle because an old newspaper clipping tells us that he lost all of them
when the bridge he was taking them across collapsed and the cattle drowned in the Burnt River.
He was one of the first people to be president of the local fair committee and relatives of mine
still are involved with running the fair today. He was also a notary public and at one point ran the
local tavern. He hunted, like most of my relatives did during my growing up, and he donated
money for a stained glass window to the Methodist church, which was the United Church by the
time I went to it and saw his name there.

My maternal great great grandmother came from Hertfordshire, England and it is likely
that I came from agricultural people on that side too. When she came across on the boat, as my
grandmother would tell it, she became fast friends with the Duchess of Inniskillen but as the boat docked in Canada, their friendship reached its mandatory end due to the distance in social standing between them. The Duchess, teary-eyed, ripped one of the cameos from her bracelet and gave it to my great great grandmother and although I saw the cameo and heard the story when I was younger, the cameo has since been lost. My grandmother was an intelligent and creative woman who read mystery novels by the stack and knitted socks and mittens for the March of Dimes.

It is highly likely that my ancestors didn’t have much time for school. My ancestors, if they were farming people, would have learned from the people around them and from the tasks and contingencies of life they had to face. Schooling, in their time, would have been about reading and writing and numeracy. My relatives, if they were going to leave progeny, who would donate money for a church window, needed enough literacy to read the Bible and enough numeracy to attend to their daily finances without getting cheated when generations later they ran a bar. The female relatives in my grandmother’s stories were always cheated. “You girls today,” she used to say, “are so lucky. You can be anything you want. You can go to school.”

The practices of school, in my ancestors’ days, would have been set apart from their daily lives because reading and writing takes one out of the flow of immediate activities. Reading and writing require that we pull away from the sound of crows in the field and the smell of thrashed hay to attend to words that if they are well-wrought might take us to an imagined somewhere else—to the stormy day of deliberation, perhaps, for a troubled Roman soldier. If my ancestors had money to afford regular attendance, someone in the family might have learned to read scripture and to write a letter, if need be. It takes time to learn to read and write because of the requirement for extended and extensive concentration, one can’t learn to read and write in passing.
Reconsidering the history of NWT education: A Northern “voice lesson”

What follows is a voice lesson that I set for myself: copying the voice in Chief Seattle’s famous speech, but I decided was too complicated for my study. I liked the layers of irony that constitute the ongoing attraction to this flowery, Victorian “Aboriginal” voice. The speech has anthologized and made into cards and posters and probably a quote or two appears on a tee shirt somewhere with a very, regal-looking Native American man. But I am also attracted to the idea that some aspect of Chief Seattle’s voice remains. According to tales that are told about him, he was a powerful orator. Moreover, with all of the complexities around mimicking Indigenous voice, when one is non-Indigenous, I thought this speech with its questionable authorship, was fair game.

Chief Seattle spoke Lushootseed and his original speech spoken (possibly) on March 11, 1854 was translated by an aboriginal translator into Chinook, the Indian Trade language. Notes were taken by one “Dr.” Smith who later wrote the speech in English and it was published in the Seattle Sunday Star on October 29, 1887. Another version: the one with which most people are familiar was created by a Hollywood screenwriter in the 1970s. (Retrieved from www.suquamish.nsn.us/chief.htm)

An excerpt from the Seattle Sunday Star’s Chief Seattle speech

Yonder sky that has wept tears of compassion
upon our fathers for centuries untold,
and which to us looks eternal, may change.
Today is fair,
tomorrow may be overcast with clouds.

My words are like the stars that never set.
Whatever Seattle says the Great Chief in Washington can rely upon with as much certainty as our paleface brothers can rely upon the return of the sun or the seasons...

The white man’s God cannot love his red children or He would protect them. They seem to be orphans who can look nowhere for help.

How, then, can we become brothers? How can your father become our Father and bring us prosperity, and awaken in us dreams of returning greatness?

Your God seems to us to be partial. He came to the white man. We never saw Him, never heard His voice. He gave the white man laws, but had no word for His red children whose teeming millions once filled this vast continent as the stars fill the firmament.

No. We are two distinct races, and must remain ever so, there is little in common between us.

My version: “The soles of denekeh”

Note: denekeh means Dene moose hide slippers Edichlechinakue means the school (literally paper house)

Silent shoe made from the smoked hide of the moose, the quiet work of our grandmothers’ hands,
beautiful though they be, they will not last.
Today’s strong soles
tomorrow may be overcome by holes.

My denekeh uppers blue with traders’ glass beads
threaded carefully, each one sewn in place
with sinew from the long, strong line of the caribou’s back.

The new white schoolteacher says
‘This is not the way we do it down South.’
You think you know better
for many years your people have been masters of the edichlechinakue
your books are many
they hold stories that cover continents
but you don’t stand a chance
against one winter in the land my people know.

In your rush to get things right
to be right, but not to do what’s right
you do not hear the baby’s laugh among you
the tall tree’s sigh or the eternal whisperings of the wind.
You have the answers
and you rush to say them first
loud, longer, least
you do not hear the waterfall’s roar.

Your people grow stronger by the day
and soon they will fill our land;
the oil and diamonds, silver and gold will flow south.
The white man’s God cannot love his northern people
or He would protect them.
How, then, can you expect us to fill your shoes?
The least of all workboots
the worn out castaways you do not want.
Why do you pretend the heavy, hard rubber that keeps our feet from the land, is a great gift?

Your thinking seems partial to us.
Fragmented. superficial. careless.
You have long ago misplaced your spirit.

We gave in to your laws
because your weapons are greater.
Because you use words with more than one meaning against us
we have acquiesced.

But do not misunderstand our acquiescence as agreement.
We do not want what you offer.
There is little in common between us.

Research questions

- What does it mean to teach in this place?
- What does it mean to teach writing here?
- What is the best way to approach the teaching of writing in this place?

Summary of argument: Teachers who think they know where they are, may be lost

I have no sense of direction; I almost always get lost. Recently, I picked up an interesting book called Why people get lost: The psychology and neuroscience of spatial orientation. The author Paul Dudchenko (2010) studies spatial orientation largely by studying what rats do in a laboratory and speculating about what humans do, based on the personal narratives to which he refers. Under “normal circumstances” our spatial representation systems keep us oriented.
Dudencho says spatial orientation requires recognition of one’s surroundings, an ability to rely on familiar landmarks and an ongoing maintenance of orientation that comes from keeping track of previous orientation. According to Dudchenko, we get lost when the visual landmarks we might use to orient ourselves are obscured—by a mist on a mountain top, for example. We can get lost in the woods or in underground tunnels when we cannot see the sun. I get lost in urban places because I am easily distracted by sights and sounds and smells that intrigue me but serve no purpose in helping me think about where I am going. When we are lost, Dudchenko tells us, we are overcome by a panicked urge to run…so much for rational thinking. When I’m lost, I first ask why the train I hear is on the wrong side of the river before it occurs to me that I am on the wrong side of the river. Dudencho says we are prone to accumulating error when we travel in ambiguous environments or are inattentive. Misorientation occurs when “a sense of direction…is no longer anchored to the external world” (p.251).

**Summary of Argument: We know where we are in school**

I came across an old article by Philip Jackson (1990), first published in 1968. He points out that if, unexpectedly, we somehow found ourselves in a school, instantly, we would know where we were because of the presence of the students’ desks, teacher’s desk, boards, maps and posters, and even the window dressing. He argues that without relying on our sight we could still recognize the school through its familiar odors.

Jackson contends that, in addition to a very stable physical environment, schools also have a fairly constant social context. The teacher often stands at the front and the students are frequently seated in the same seats so that a quick visual sweep is all that is required to check attendance. There is what he calls a “ritualistic and cyclic quality” to the activities carried out in the classroom. These activities are identified as: seatwork, group discussion, demonstrations, and
question and answer period. Other activities, although less frequent, also include audio visual display, testing sessions, and games.

More than forty years after Jackson’s 1968 article, things look, smell, sound and feel the same in schools. Students still learn to live in a crowd, in what is basically an evaluative setting, where the division between who has power and who does not is clearly drawn.

Literature Re-view:

1) Possibility in place; 2) Complexity thinking and good teaching; 3) Northern voices writing pedagogy; 4) Laying down a voice path while teaching writing; 5) Subarctic radical hermeneutics; and 6) Ethical know-how in the cold night of truth

1) Bon Echo: Possibility in place

Bon Echo Provincial Park, one hour and 15 minutes north of Kingston, is tent-wall-to-tent-wall campers the weekend we are there. Young women in bikinis pass by my site followed closely by young men in board shorts with baseball caps on backwards. One of them casually tosses a football. An older couple walks their dog, the baby next door protests and an American couple is making toast in their RV. Someone drums down the hill while a multigenerational Southeast Asian family plays cricket on the lawn outside of the communal bathroom and shower. The next day on a rainy afternoon at the park store, an Aboriginal woman laughs as she holds up a pair of gigantic, red plaid pyjama bottoms to the non-Aboriginal man she is with.

On the July weekend we are at this provincial park, my family and I learn that this park was a gift from the Densions, an artistic family who invited writers and artists to this location. Before them, in 1889, a Methodist family, who established the first inn on the grounds, didn’t allow drinking and insisted that their guests attend Sunday school. The beach at Mazinaw Lake is
lined with yellow and orange canoes and turquoise kayaks as people try their hand at steering in the bay while the Mugwump ferry waits to take hikers across to the escarpment that has risen out of Ontario’s second deepest lake. The sheer rock is scaled by some climbers while, from the relative safety of their boats, less adventurous visitors admire the ode to Walt Whitman chiseled into the rock or the faint pictographs that quietly tell stories few people remember. For the Algonquin people who made the “mysterious” pictograph painted in hematite and red ochre just above the water line, this place is a sacred place: the place where the elements converge. The pine forest stands as silent witness to the generations of human and non-human presence.

With so many layers in places and all of them open to possibilities for meaning, we can become deluded that places are as fixed as they can become in the stories. “What people make of their places is closely connected to what they make of themselves as members of society and inhabitants of the earth” (Basso, 1996, p.7). Malpas (2005) tells us that we bring order to our lives through imagined stories, as much as by stories of what has already happened; many of our ordering narratives rely on culture-specific conventional motifs rather than an actual grasp of specific events. He also reminds us that beyond their capacity to craft coherency in life, narratives also lie behind the capacity for action. As a teacher and a researcher, I need to be mindful of the stories I tell about place, for my stories have implications for my actions and because I am in a position of power, my stories can limit the actions of others. And because I set the parameters for the learning in my class, the stories that I tell enable and constrain the possibilities for the stories that my students will tell.

2) What is good teaching? Complexity thinking

“What is good teaching?” is the provocative title of the feature article in the fall 2010 edition of Education Canada, a professional magazine for teachers and administrators. In this
article by Sumara and Davis, they point to studies based on student achievement tests that indicate that regardless of demographics some teachers consistently inspire their students to achievement while others do not. These teachers may not be the ones who exhibit the qualities that students value in their teachers “feelings of comfort, security, feedback, being valued” (p. 4), but rather they are focused on long terms indicators such as “learning something.” The authors point to studies that have been unable to pinpoint the qualities or practices that are common to good teachers and they tell us that the error in these studies lies in the emphasis on “good:” that we understand what “teaching” is, is taken for granted. While learning is dependent on the teacher’s teaching, the teacher does not cause the learner to learn. Learners are complex, self-determining beings who are not changed by their teachers but challenged by them. The teacher sets the conditions for learning and focuses attention in the moments of engagement. The teacher is also responsible for listening to and understanding his or her students and bringing together the collective around a shared project. Students negotiate the level of difficulty, choosing something a little bit harder than they think themselves capable and teachers push with the right amount of enthusiasm to ensure that students always find themselves just a little more capable than they believed they were. Intelligence, for good teachers, is not something people are born with, but rather is focused and demanding practice. Good teachers likely have deep pedagogical content knowledge; without this, it is hard to set conditions that invite multiple interpretations. It is challenging to anticipate what students are likely to do if one cannot imagine what these interpretations might compel students to do. Good teachers are also curious learners, delighting in the surprises of where the practices they invite might take individual learners and the class. “Find out what works and run with it.” “Plan like crazy and be prepared to scrap it.” “Nothing breeds success like success.” “Above all else, the quality the teacher requires is empathy.” These are the pedagogic ‘best practices’ of the teachers in the Northernvoices action research study.
3) An alternative to wearing suits to class: *Northernvoices* writing pedagogy

Freedman, Adam, and Smart’s 1994 study “Wearing Suits to Class” found students in an undergraduate financial analysis course founded on workplace experiences took on the outward signs and symbols of workplace behavior. They wore suits to class in anticipation of the work world they anticipated entering. They took their cues for written reports, oral presentations and documents from modeling provided by the professor, from the readings and from other sources. It seemed that motivated students will adopt the forms of writing of a given class even without explicit instruction. But of course, in other classrooms there is a lack of congruency between the anticipated work world and the writing assignments offered; many students in these classes do not find their written assignments meaningful.

In the NWT, part of our mandate is to prepare our students for the northern workplace which may well mean the oil and gas and diamond mining industries, service industries and territorial and Aboriginal government jobs. The students in northern schools may see themselves as a long way away from the world of full-time work. At the May 2011 storytelling festival, in Yellowknife, Michael Kusugak, Inuit writer and storyteller, characterized some northern young people as “walking around with ear buds in their ears dreaming of lives in Hollywood.” Many of the students I taught said they had no intention of staying in Fort Simpson; they were going to some place better—possibly Yellowknife or Edmonton. When I asked what they might do once they got there, many of the students were not quite sure. I do not know how young people in the North think about their future work lives and I did not ask this question of the teachers in my study. I would guess, however, that they are not likely, even with explicit instruction, to be enthralled by writing assignments that prepare them for the work orders, contractual agreements or funding proposals that may be required in their future workplaces in the NWT.
In the action research study, the teachers found students were more likely to be engaged by writing that was related to their interests, although this did not always mean that this interest was a topic for student writing. The center of gravity for the writing emerged out of the conditions that the teacher set, allowing students to write out of their experiences, their interests and their areas of expertise. Perhaps students have niggling ideas, perceptions about how things are in the world, conceptions about what it means to be human and a well-worded teacher prompt can set the parameters that allow them to run with those ideas. When students are asked to name their interests as possible topics, they may “shut down” before they even begin to write—Does this topic suit me? How will it be received by the teacher? What will my classmates think about me? Do I have enough information, knowledge or stories to write well about this topic? Have I tried to write about this topic before and the result was terrible. In a live chat during the study, Annette spoke about students who wanted to write about Canada’s involvement in Afghanistan, but were surprised to discover that, beyond a strong opinion about whether Canadian soldiers should be there or not, they possessed little knowledge about the situation. I don’t mean to suggest, that we should never ask this of students but rather we should build confidence in their ability to choose a suitable topic through practices that invite writing.

In writing pedagogy, there is a place for generative, free-flowing practices that engage students in writing. Many of the prompts in the *Northernvoices* study were described by participants as “low stakes” because they were not evaluated; teachers don’t mark everything a student reads or says in a class, but we often mark everything a student writes. I think the practices were also low stakes because as several participants remarked, they were about playing with language or playing with new possibilities for writing such as taking on perspectives one hasn’t tried on before. Writing in classrooms is often highly competitive, serious business.
I don’t know that anyone can teach the students of the NWT everything that they will need for the northern workplace of the future. I do know what I hope for those students—the entitlement that Fowler (2006) says all human beings should be able to claim: “a quiet celebration of living an extraordinary ordinary life with loving relationships, hard work, social and ethical responsibilities, and creative problem-solving amid the difficulties a life presents” (p.15).

4) Laying down a voice path while teaching writing: Speaking my mind

Of Elbow’s definitions of the five characteristics of voice: audible voice, dramatic voice, distinctive voice, voice with authority and resonant voice, the latter is the concept that floats nebulously into controversy. If the reader hears resonant voice it means s/he makes inferences about the relationship between the text and the actual writer. In writing, it seems like there is a direct link between the reader and the writer; for the reader, the discourse fits the imagined writer and perhaps what the reader considers as the intention of the writing. The writer works to shape the meaning for an imagined reader (even if it is the writer him- or herself) pausing to read before beginning to write again; if the writer is trying to write something humorous, s/he may in that reading pause laugh out loud if s/he got it right. Of course, there is no guarantee that others will have the same response, and perhaps this frightens student writers. Elbow says that what we hear as resonant voice in writing is most often like-minded resonance, but he adds that we can also hear around our own predilections and tastes. I wonder if one has to learn to do that even if one is a teacher.

In a reader/writer’s mind there is an internal landscape of other texts read, spoken and heard in an interactive ongoing relationship with other texts in the world. In the nexus of possibility in this networked landscape of the textual representations of many embodied,
emplaced minds how should teachers begin to lay down the voice path while writing? They may begin playfully, as we did in some of the voice lessons in the action research study. In one voice lesson, we wrote from various personas and enjoyed the process and the resultant writing. Teachers should not add to students’ anxiety levels by asking students to: “Be sure to work with diction, syntax and images that sound like you—well, not “you” really, but that curious illusion of words on the page that is not really “you” but sounds like “you.” When the locus for meaning inheres in the relationship between the consciousness portrayed on the page through the choices and selections from what might seem an endless repertoire of words and phrases, the selection is probably limited to familiars and favorites. Without obsessing about who is the imagined reader, it is likely that the imagined reader has a lot in common with the people the writer knows. Hopefully, the imagined reader is someone other than a ramrod, stiff school teacher who obsesses over matters of convention and correctness, above all else.

Perhaps what was successful about these short bursts of writing in the Northervoices project was that they tricked participants into writing before they had time to process any anxiety. Indeed many of the participants in both the pilot and the research project mentioned this. But they also succeeding in pushing people to write beyond the familiar. Indeed, Eric commented on this very thing. It is the surprise of writing something that you didn’t quite know you knew, that may also prove engaging.

In order to believe that laying down the voice path is viable, you have to think your students are interesting people. If what I value is diversity in distractions, entertainment and experiences and have the financial wherewithal to support this value, I might silently agree with some of my students when they respond that they have nothing to write about after I have asked them to create a list of writing topics. I taught students in Fort Simpson who had I asked: What do you do after school?” might have answered: “Walk around town.” They did walk around town; I
know this because I saw them as I was out walking around town myself! If I asked my students to write about what they did yesterday, their accounts might be terribly boring—close, but shorter cousins to the infamous what-I-did-on-my-summer-vacation-stories. I got up. I ate. I hung out with friends. I ate. I watched t.v. I walked around town. I went to bed.

Guy Vanderhaaghe’s story “The Jimi Hendrix Experience” is about what one boy did on his summer holidays. After a family move, a 14-year-old boy is caught in the nether land of summer with not much to do and no one to do it with until he meets two ne’er do well guys with whom he bides his time until school starts. Vanderhaaghe, an accomplished writer, can write a what-I-did-on-my-summer-vacation-story that is a compelling read. The boys bike around town, stopping to play aimless pranks and vandalize property, but the heart of the story is something other than a list of delinquent activities. Students may not be sophisticated enough to get at this kind of possibility in any genre but a teacher can compose writing practices that might compel it from them with greater likelihood than the stodgy practices of “writing.”

Teachers will also need to think that their students are not always in need of fixing. In the NWT, we do not fare well on the Alberta Achievement Tests in grade 3, 6 and 9 or on the academic level of the Alberta Diploma Examination for grade 12. Again, I do not suggest that we ignore these results, but it seems that our answer to low results on standardized tests is often more time spent with text-based approaches to writing. I am not convinced that this is effective and it seems to me that we have empirical evidence to suggest that it is not, unless we tell the story that a complete focus on the text-based approach is the right way to do—the problem lies with the teachers who just don’t know what they are doing. What those uneducated teachers need (What are Faculties of Education teaching, anyway?) is boxed kits of leveled reader and writer programs to ensure that students get what they need. I do not have any empirical evidence to prove that laying down a path while writing will necessarily raise test scores. I have only my commonsense
conviction that if many northern students are not engaging willingly with writing, so much so that some northern teachers (not the ones in this study) complain about how little their students write, getting students to write is the first step.

5) All the way down: Subarctic radical hermeneutics

(The words on the left are Caputo’s (2000) while the words on the right belong to one who has packed her bags and gone to the Subarctic.)

by radical interpretation

The leaves fall quickly

I mean that interpretation goes all the way down,

against the muted green brown waters

that there are no uninterpreted facts of the matter

although a snow storm may arise leaving leaves

that settle silently at the bottom

on the trees.

that can be unearthed by patiently peeling

When I first arrived, the landscape was not what I had imagined.

away the layers of interpretation…

So many tracts of untouched land, the landscape I thought would press upon the mind like monumental mountains…
the debate about interpretation matters

but it did not.

is not between "relativism" and "objective truth"

The land flowed with dark brooding rivers bordered by silent sloping trees

but between conditional and unconditional understanding.

but between conditional and unconditional understanding.

The horizon was lower–

I walked on less ground

True understanding is never unconditional, but always a matter of finding the right conditions

under which understanding can take place...

soft strokes of orange threaded through with wispy traces of violet and pink.

Absolutely unconditional understanding means understanding under no conditions.

In winter the sky darkened to become the backdrop for the smoky green trails of the northern lights.

Just so: Under no condition is this possible:
we are not hardwired to assume an absolute standpoint.
We are not omniscient eternal beings outside every context.

Once I was privileged to walk beneath as the sky glowed with full red lights.

We are not God, but what Soren Kierkegaard liked to call "poor existing individuals," people who pull on their pants one leg at a time.
on another occasion, the snow creaking beneath my boots like Styrofoam,
the northern lights writhing yellow green

Understanding always has a point of view,

Otherwise
Understanding
So unlike the velvet navy sky I knew.

has no point
and it has no view.

6) Shivering through the night of truth: Ethical know-how

For Caputo (2000), there is no way around the beliefs and values we hold; we live cut off from the heart of unconcealed truth. We dwell in both the truth and untruth so neither science nor morals can be what they want to be all the way down. Neither science nor morals can offer a way out of the human condition. Caputo takes up Foucault’s assertion that the “night of truth” occurs when truth allows itself to be invaded by untruth; truth is destroyed when one tries to assert “the truth of truth.”

According to Caputo, the ‘individual’ is an invention of the Christian confessional” (p. 31). The pastor needs to know what is going on inside individual minds in order to offer spiritual direction. Pastoral power depends upon producing the truth of truth and Caputo sees examples of pastoral techniques everywhere in social and health care, in the criminal justice system, and of course, in education. Hope lies in asking Foucault’s question—who are we now? And responding with a hermeneutics of refusal. We might be liberated, not from the state, but from becoming the kind of individual the state wants us to be. Foucault also implies, according to Caputo, that no
historical context is exhaustive or totalizing; there is something left over or left out of what the individual would be incorporated into…but what is it?

Repressive power operates through exclusive practices that keep untruth out and makes prohibitions against it. But untruth is also silenced by talk in productive power. In top-down power structures, repression works just fine, but in the case of democratic millions, productive power works to keep open the negative space of what the individual is not (rather than define what s/he is). Foucault, in his analyses of power, distinguishes between the power over objects and the power exerted over people. Caputo says“[p]ower is a set of actions upon other actions …Power is a matter neither of pushing boulders about with great bulldozers nor of a pure dialogue between Platonic souls” (p. 33). Power belongs to a quasi-intentional sphere like motivation, although it is more coercive than motivation, which is an intentional freedom. Power sets up frames and ranges of possibility. Power implies freedom because without it, power is merely force or constraint. If power is tricky enough, it will co-opt freedom and if subversion is recalcitrant enough, it will make power nervous. For Caputo, the idea is to keep open the free play of antagonisms.

But why bother with this free play if there is nothing to be recovered? If identity is not that unidentifiable something that is being repressed, what is being repressed? For Foucault, it is a difference. Not a positive ideal of the self, but simply the capacity to resist the identities that are opposed upon us; with resistance we can create new identities, as circumstances allow. The fragment that exists outside of the historical context is the freedom to resist—this freedom is irreducible to the historical context leaving us with the power-to-be-otherwise. “We are never what we are; something different is always possible” (p. 35). The ‘I’ or ‘we’ and its capacity to be otherwise is Caputo’s radical hermeneutics. His hermeneutics turn on the loss of fixed meaning. He rejects all the possibilities for, as he phrases it, “homo psychologicus, homo economicus,
homo religious and even the positive identity that Foucault posited in his earlier writings “homo tragicus” (and then, just for fun he adds “homo cyberneticus” to his list). In the hermeneutic dimension of negativity, we do not know who we are, but beneath the layers offered by all of the selves offered by social engineering, lies the capacity to be otherwise. This capacity, makes productive power more than a little nervous, for in its resolve to produce certain types of individuals, it becomes anxious about difference.

But after the ruthless facing up to the radically hermeneutic facts, now what? What follows from not knowing who we are is, according to Caputo, our responsiveness to this abysmally cold night. And the recognition that we are not alone. We all suffer Foucault’s cold night of truth; the healing gesture is not to explain it away, but to affirm our community. We, who move easily within the relations of power, cause others to suffer. The healing gesture is compassion (which is defined in many traditions), but could also be right relations as it is laid out in Indigenous wisdom traditions. Because the tradition from which Caputo most often draws is Christianity, he speaks about forgiveness. Forgiveness opens the space in the social network; it makes the future possible and denies the past its fate. Forgiveness makes new subjectivity possible; it heals not through analysis, but through compassion.

**Methods: Interrupting projections**

As I discussed in the methodology section of this dissertation, the benefit of focusing on the details without trying to connect them to an overall picture is the interruption of familiar ways of thinking. It was crucial to me that in the writing that is this dissertation, I mirror the ethical practices that I propose in the study. Additionally, I wanted to write in a way that would reflect the dynamic nature of the lived experience of teaching and I wanted to write a dissertation that could hold as many of the dimensions of place as possible. For the reader’s sake, I offered
recurring metaphors, images, motifs, syntax and diction as a way to create coherence in a
dissertation that focused on the details without trying to connect them to an overall picture,
pushing the readers to interrupt projections. That was the intended method in my madness.

**Methodology: Placemaking**

When I lived in Fort Simpson, I was “out of place” as Chambers (2009) describes her experience of growing up in the north, always conscious of her own foreignness. My sense of that place cannot come from the lived experience of a culturally imposed order on that particular physical topography of the region around Fort Simpson. I visited Nahanni National Park and camped several times at Little Doctor Lake, but most of my time was spent on the island that was the town. Nothing was sacred about my movement through Denendeh: through me there was no reaffirmation of place, memory and Dene identity. I came to Fort Simpson to work and when I did leave it was for meetings in Yellowknife, for conferences and vacations in locations throughout southern Canada, or for holidays in the southwestern United States, Costa Rica, England, Wales, France, the east coast of Australia and both islands of New Zealand.

I did not wish to control the meaning of Fort Simpson, but through my experiences in that place and through my shaping by that place, I was drawn into a hermeneutic process that required continuous engagement and reshaping. The theoretical framework for the place-making of this dissertation followed Basso (1999) and Casey (1976, 1987) who suggest that place-making involves many acts of remembering and imagining that work together in complex ways. What is remembered about a place includes sensory details and visual and verbal accounts about what happened there and those details and accounts become the enabling constraints (Davis, Sumara, & Luce-Kapler, 2008) for how it will be imagined. The possibilities are expanded through
conjecture and speculation which create new possibilities, providing an expanded account of how things which might have been are brought into the present to set possibilities for the future.

**Interpretation of results**

On the last day of the *Northernvoices* study, at the workshop in Yellowknife, I took the teachers through a set of exercises that had them consider a place that was significant to them. They wrote vivid descriptions of the fields and front porches of their childhood places. When I asked them write about a significant place in their community, they all wrote about school. The teachers were surprised when they considered this and later in conversation I asked them to think about how their teaching might be different if they lived in a different locality. Edmonton became the example of another possible locality and the teachers emphasized the capacity to know their students well that occurs in a smaller locality where people often see each other out of school. They felt that the intimacy with which they knew their students meant that they were not able to think of teaching in “generic” ways such that “it’s different from year to year with different kids” (Margaret). The prevalent narrative in teaching that we take educational theory/approaches/paradigms and adapt them to various contexts underpinned that conversation and others that occurred throughout our workshops. I had wanted to explore alternatives to the normative practices of writing instruction.

While Information Communications Technology may help reduce northern teachers’ isolation from one another, I do not think the wiki and subsequent MSN conversations were ideal for my project. An inquiry that prompts participants to consider the significance of place in writing practices might have been better served by having us all in the same locality. The teachers were all experts in progressive writing pedagogies so it is possible that they did not see any need to go beyond the understandings of those approaches. Granted, these approaches are more
desirable than the desperate default to work sheets (called ‘work shits’ by a friend of mine) that we encounter far too often in northern localities. But I was interested in thinking about approaches from the ground up. I thought of the approaches the teachers mentioned not so much as “best practices” to be adapted to place but rather practices that belong to a repertoire of possibilities. I did not espouse beginning with a practice and then creating modifications to best suit the students, but rather beginning from place I wanted the teachers to imagine practices that might suit their students.

Possibly, this shift in direction requires more time than I allotted for the study; additionally, the two-week interval between each workshop may have been too long. But the data also suggests that the teachers may not have been psychically committed to the places where they teach. Recently, a friend, who has lived in Yellowknife for 30 years, described her trip to Newfoundland. She told me that she saw the landscape of Yellowknife in Gros Morne Provincial Park or as she put it, she saw: “our rock, our black spruce and our cranberries.” My friend dwells in Yellowknife she doesn’t just live there dreaming, like so many northern students feel compelled to do, of better places.

It may be difficult to dwell in northern communities when one is a southern teacher. When I arrived at the airport in Fort Simpson, so many years ago, the woman who was supposed to pick me up did not arrive. She was the only contact number I had. Without knowing that the airport was 16km out of town (why would the airport be far from a small town, I reasoned, without knowing Fort Simpson was on an island) I determined to walk with my suitcases in tow. I hadn’t gone far before a truck with a helicopter company logo stopped and the driver laughingly told me I would have a long walk. He offered a ride and placed my suitcases in the back. The other younger man in the vehicle also got out; it was evident that I was supposed to sit in the middle of the bench seat. The conversation on the ride to town was one-sided raucous flirtations.
When we reached the town, I was dumped unceremoniously at the school with my bags. I felt like Anne of Green Gables. I did not feel I was off to a good start in my new place.

I was left to my own devices in the community for the first year or so for there was an expectation that I would socialize with the single teachers, nurses and pilots. Later when I formed a friendship with a local family, Richard (not his real name) said, “We always wait around to see if people are racist before we bother to make friends with them.” I do not suggest that the onus is on community members to make newcomers feel immediately welcome; I do wish to suggest that finding one’s way in a northern community can be challenging. The people of Denendeh have been on the land since the beginning of storied time; from the perspectives of anthropologists they are the group that has lived longest in any region of Canada. Despite the kind gestures of some people who welcome me “home” when I visit with my family, for most people I will never be from Fort Simpson even if I choose to live there all of my life. The Dene have historical and contemporary reasons not to accept newcomers with open arms but the result may be that newcomer teachers may not feel like they belong in places other than the school while members of the community may resent how little input they have into what goes on in school. As a new teacher, I learned to accept ambiguity and paradox as part of the place where I taught. My psychic commitment to Fort Simpson grew as aspects of place were revealed to me.

Writing helped me negotiate the contested spaces of my life in Fort Simpson. My journal writing was largely the self-help genre of the eighties focusing more on the weather in my head than the weather outside. But as I reread the journals several years ago, I noted that there were a few entries that dealt with my sense-making of place. By and large, letters to my mother were the most significant writing practice that contributed to my understandings of place. Telephone calls cost 85 cents a minute when I first went North and after several phone bills nearing $300.00 a month, I took up writing reflective, contemplative, interpretive, pieces about place. My mother, a
curious and intelligent woman, was an enthusiastic audience for the writing I sent her. The letter writing was the beginning of my commitment to writing and my conviction that what writing did for me, it could do for others.

As writing can help negotiate contested spaces, one can approach the teaching of writing in a way that opens up spaces. Malpas (1999) reminds us that space has been narrowly understood throughout Western thought as “a pure realm of containment” (p. 26) and cites Casey (1997) and critical geographers such as Massey (2005) for whom is a dynamic entity—not a fixed backdrop for social action. Opening up spaces in the classroom means allowing for the co-presence of elements that may be present but as yet unrevealed. I remain convinced that one can teach writing in ways that allow for creative expansion.

**Limitations: The voices I left out**

Inuit and Inuvialuit voices are largely absent in this dissertation. Although I explained their absence due to my teaching experiences in Denedeh, Inuit and Inuvialuit omission does not allow a full picture of the Northwest Territories. Even after the creation of Nunavut in 1999, Inuit people still live in the NWT, particularly in places like Yellowknife. The Inuvialuit territory at the delta of the Mackenzie River is part of the NWT. I also haven’t made mention of the effect of political boundaries and I have written about the NWT as though the delineating lines on the political map haven’t created a number of problems for Indigenous people who would have drawn different lines.

Because I did not consider this study through critical lenses such as gender, race, and class, important stories have been left out. These stories are crucial to understandings necessary to trouble the history that Foucault warns can trap us. Additionally, I did not take up a psychotherapeutic lens because of my conviction that teachers too often rely on folk psychology.
to explain student behavior. Fowler (2006) reminds us that teaching is difficult; teaching in the Northwest Territories can be very difficult. The mass media often make those who don’t live there, aware of the troubling realities of alcohol abuse and violence that daunt many Indigenous communities. It was not my intention to gloss over these difficulties or pretend they do not exist. But when the issues that trouble Indigenous communities are reduced to the problems of individual psyches, parents just need to smarten up before their children can do well in school. All of the other dimensions of place disappear. With the mass migration of Europeans to North America, came a transformation of that place and a loss of freedom of mobility for Indigenous people. Psychologists like Bruce Alexander (2008) and medical doctors like Maté Gabor (2009), assert that dislocation is at the root of addiction.

**Implications for myself, for others, for the land, and for the spiritual world**

For myself:

This dissertation helped me think through how I will work with teachers in my new role as English Language Arts and Literacy coordinator for the NWT. It has also laid the theoretical foundation for future research projects where I will continue to explore writing and its relationships to, in and with place. Although my hunch that voice in writing is related to place was not realized in this study, I am by no means finished with the idea.

For others:

In the four papers that came out of the data of the action research project, I hope that I have pointed to some possible areas for future study. Complexity thinking offers the opportunity to think about the pragmatics of transformation that is teaching at the classroom level, although it can also address some issues across levels. That northern students willingly engage with information communications technology, points to the need for research that explores Indigenous
students’ relationship to and experience of new literacies. Personal responses and narratives are a mainstay of high school English classes; research into the way this “personal” writing connects with shared projects could expand the possibilities for this type of writing. And finally, rather than speculating about the possibilities for voice in teaching writing, it would be interesting to observe classrooms where teachers are already laying down the voice path in writing and see what there is to be learned.

For the land:

I tried to bring elements of the more-than-human world into this dissertation out of a conviction that those elements greatly influence our relationship to place. Malpas and Casey argue that our notion of place is opaque; I concur with Abram (1999) and Gruenewald (2003a) that the influence of more-than-human-world in place is almost invisible in contemporary Western understandings. It was hard to find the words to write about the natural world as though it mattered in its own right and not only because of its economic; medicinal; food, water and oxygen producing; psychologically uplifting after a busy-week-in-the-city reasons. A year or so ago, a link to a Youtube clip circulated among people I know. The clip featured a group of people, mostly women, wailing in an old growth forest that was about to be cut down. I understood exactly why those people were wailing and although my personality would not allow me to join a communal grieving group (the fear that I would wind up the laughing stock of people on YouTube, notwithstanding), I felt like crying with them. One of my Yellowknife students used to tease that I am a “tree hugger.” In fact, I am a tree patter; I especially like to give some of the old ones a pat, wondering what they have known in their time and encouraging them to hang in there because we don’t always treat them very nicely these days.

For the spiritual world:
At a workshop for teachers in Fort Simpson, Eddie Bellerose, visiting Cree elder, told our group:

“The circle of giving is larger than two.” He maintained that in Western traditions the relationship for giving is most often reciprocal. This dissertation has not come out of a relationship of reciprocal exchange: it has emerged from the circle of giving.

For that circle, I am grateful.
References


Territories Legislative Assembly.


Appendix A

Ethics clearance pilot

January 5, 2009

Susan Catlin
PhD Candidate
Faculty of Education
Queen’s University

GREB Ref# GEDUC-425-09
Title "Voice Lessons: Writing Practices in the Northwest Territories"

Dear Susan Catlin,

The General Research Ethics Board (GREB), by means of a delegated board review, has cleared your proposal entitled “Voice Lessons: Writing Practices in the Northwest Territories” for ethical compliance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (TCP) and Queen’s ethics policies. In accordance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (article E.1.b) and Senate Terms of Reference (article G), your project has been cleared for one year. At the end of each year, the GREB will ask if your project has been completed and if not, what changes have occurred or will occur in the next year.

You are reminded of your obligation to advise the GREB, with a copy to the E-REB, of any adverse event(s) that occur during this one year period (details available on webpage www.queensu.ca/yic/research/grebfoms.html/Adverse ). An adverse event includes, but is not limited to, a complaint, a change or unexpected event that alters the level of risk for the researcher or participants or situation that requires a substantial change in approach to a participant(s). You are also advised that any adverse events must be reported to the GREB within 48 hours.

You are also reminded that all changes that might affect human participants must be cleared by the GREB. For example you must report changes in study procedures or implementations of new aspects into the study procedures on the Ethics Change Form that can be found at http://www.queensu.ca/yic/research/forms.html/Change. These changes must be sent to Linda Frid at the Office of Research Services or FRIDL@queensu.ca prior to implementation. Ms. Frid will forward your request for protocol changes to the appropriate GREB reviewers and/or the GREB Chair.

On behalf of the General Research Ethics Board, I wish you continued success in your research.

Yours sincerely,

Joan Stevenson, PhD
Professor and Chair
General Research Ethics Board

cc: Chair E-REB: Don Klinger
    Faculty Supervisor: Rebecca Lace-Kapler
    Graduate Studies & Bureau of Research, Angelina Gennarelli
Appendix B

Ethics clearance project

July 31, 2009

Ms. Susan Cutfin
837 Datzell Lane
Kingston, ON K7M 7P9

GREB Ref # GEDUC-447-09
Title: “Voice Lessons: Writing Pedagogy in the Northwest Territories”

Dear Ms. Cutfin:

The General Research Ethics Board (GREB), by means of a delegated board review, has cleared your proposal entitled “Exact Title on Application” for ethical compliance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (TCPS) and Queen’s ethics policies. In accordance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (article D.1.6) and Senate Terms of Reference (article G), your project has been cleared for one year. At the end of each year, the GREB will ask if your project has been completed and if not, what changes have occurred or will occur in the next year.

You are reminded of your obligation to advise the GREB, with a copy to your unit REB, of any adverse event(s) that occur during this one year period (details available on webpage www.queensu.ca/ops/research/researchrules.html/Adverse). An adverse event includes, but is not limited to, a complaint, a change or unexpected event that alters the level of risk for the researcher or participants or situation that requires a substantial change in approach to a participant(s). You are also advised that any adverse events must be reported to the GREB within 48 hours.

You are also reminded that all changes that might affect human participants must be cleared by the GREB. For example you must report changes in study procedures or implementations of new aspects into the study procedures or the Ethics Change Form that can be found at http://www.queensu.ca/ops/ethics/california.html/Change. These changes must be sent to Linda Frid at the Office of Research Services or FRID@queensu.ca prior to implementation. Ms. Frid will forward your request for protocol changes to the appropriate GREB reviewers and / or the GREB Chair.

On behalf of the General Research Ethics Board, I wish you continued success in your research.

Yours sincerely,

Joan Stevenson, PhD
Professor and Chair
General Research Ethics Board

c.c. Dr. Rebecca Luce-Kaplan, Supervisor
Dr. Malcolm Welsh, Chair, E-REB
E-REB: c/o Graduate Studies & Bureau of Research, Attn: Celina Freitas

JS/g
Appendix C

Letters of Information

LETTER OF INFORMATION for ECE
Voice lessons: Writing pedagogy in the Northwest Territories

Dear prospective action research participant:

Thank you for considering participation in an action research, called Voice lessons: Writing pedagogy in the Northwest Territories, aimed at developing writing practices, responsive to the place-based needs of northern students. The ultimate goal of this reflective, problem-solving project is for us to investigate together, writing practices that could help northern students to become better writers by thinking about what might make sense for who they are and where they live. I am currently a third year doctoral student in the Faculty of Education at Queen’s University, but I was a high school English teacher in Fort Simpson for 14 years and in Yellowknife for 5, and often felt that many of my students were resistant to writing. I wish to organize an action research circle of 10-12 teachers from across the NWT in order to explore place-conscious and place-responsive writing practices. We will participate in an online writer’s workshops and also discuss our ideas about writing practices that work best with northern students. This project has been cleared by the Queen’s University General Research Ethics Board and also by Mrs. Peg Pardy at School Services at the Department of Education, Culture and Employment.

Beginning on Wednesday, September 30 in Yellowknife, we will get together for a morning writer’s workshop session (one hour and 15 minutes), followed by a 45 minute semi-structured group interview. In the afternoon, we will orient ourselves on the wiki called “northernvoices”: a collaborative website that I created using free wiki software. Here, we will post and respond to the work that will be our online writers’ workshop. We will also become familiar with MNS which will be used once a month so that we can have discussions of ideas.
generated on the wiki. In order to participate in this circle, you will need to have access to a computer and the internet, once at home in your community. Part one of the action research will emphasize writing from our own places--places we have come from, visited and travelled through, and the place where we now work. (Place, of course, includes the people who live there and their social practices.) These place-conscious practices will run from December to October for 5 sessions (roughly every two weeks) with 5 live chat discussions. The online sessions will require one and a half to two hours of your time and the discussions will last for approximately one hour.

From January to March, for 5 sessions, we will work on practices that are place-responsive by exploring practices that we think would work best with our students. We will have 5 MSN discussions. In May, we will meet for a one day writing workshop to go discuss revision practices and to go over the findings from our study. Our conversations on that day will be taped and transcribed.

Your participation is completely voluntary. I am inviting you to join this circle because I believe our work will be rewarding, as new or experienced writers and as teachers of writing. Our postings and responses and discussions will begin with your experience of the writing practices that I present but will expand from there. I have ideas for writing practices, but will also be taking direction from the group; we shall see what emerges. Privacy will be protected as the wiki and MSN discussions will only be open to members of our group; our September and May discussions will be audio taped and transcribed and then the tape will be destroyed. None of the data will contain your name or the identity of the place where you work. Data will be secured in a locked filing cabinet and confidentiality is assured to the extent possible. My supervisor, Dr. Rebecca Luce-Kapler may also see this data. The original writing pieces that you post during the 12 writing sessions will not be used for analysis, but reference may be made to this original work through a phrase or brief summary, in order to provide a context for the ideas that emerge out of our group about place-based writing pedagogy for the north.

You are free to withdraw from the study at any time. If you choose to withdraw, there will be no penalty and your data will be destroyed and therefore not used as part of the study, if you so wish. I do not foresee any risks, discomforts or inconveniences associated with this research study. Confidentiality within the group will be requested at the outset of the project so that all participants understand that comments made during any type of discussion must remain within the group. In group discussions or postings on the wiki, you do not have to answer any
questions that you do not want to (for example questions that make you feel uncomfortable). The results of this study will be published in academic and professional journals and theses, as well as in book form; a pseudonym will replace your name on all data that you provide to protect your identity. The data may also be used in the future for secondary analysis. If you are interested in these reports, I will send you a copy. It is my hope that our investigation will be useful for teaching writing in the Northwest Territories.

If you have any questions about this project, please contact Susan Catlin at 613-384-0478 or 6sjc3@queensu.ca or contact my supervisor, Dr. Rebecca Luce-Kapler at rebecca.luce-kapler@queensu.ca. For questions, concerns, or complaints about the research ethics of this study, please contact the Education Research Ethics Board at ereb@queensu.ca or the chair of Queen’s University General Research Ethics Board, Dr. Joan Stevenson at 613-533-6081 or chair.GREB@queensu.ca.

If you agree to participate in the research study, please sign the consent form. Your signature on this form tells me that you understand what is involved and that you agree to participate. Please keep this letter for your information.

Sincerely,

Susan Catlin
LETTER OF INFORMATION (board permission to miss 2 days of school)
Voice lessons: Writing pedagogy in the Northwest Territories

Dear Director:

Thank you for considering the participation of one of the board’s teachers in an action research aimed at developing writing practices, responsive to the place-based needs of northern students. The ultimate goal of this project is to investigate writing practices that could help northern students become better writers by thinking about what might make sense for who they are and where they live. I am currently a third year doctoral student in the Faculty of Education at Queen’s University, but I was a high school English teacher in Fort Simpson for 14 years and in Yellowknife for 5. Many of my students were resistant to writing and much of the writing produced was below grade level. I wish to organize a critical literary action circle of 5-7 teachers from across the NWT, in order to explore place-responsive writing practices in online writer’s workshops and discussions. This project has been cleared by the Queen’s University General Research Ethics Board and also by Mrs. Peg Pardy at School Services at the Department of Education, Culture and Employment.

The majority of the time spent on the critical literary action research will occur online outside of class time. Teachers are invited to participate in 12 writers’ workshops organized through a wiki, from October to April, in order to investigate place-responsive writing practices. We will also ‘meet’ for 7 audio sessions on Elluminate Live to discuss these practices. These online workshops and discussions will be bookended by two one-day workshops: one on Wednesday, September 29, 2009 in Yellowknife and one on May 13, 2010. The September workshop is an orientation to the writing practices and to the software platforms that we will use. The May workshop brings together the best practices in a final face-to-face workshop and discussion.

Peg Pardy, at School Services, is very supportive of this research into northern writing pedagogy for junior/intermediate/senior students. As I would like to have all of the regions represented, Mrs. Pardy suggested that I consider the pool of people she is bringing to
Yellowknife for work on the referent sets for the grade 7-9 English curriculum. Her department will pick up all of the expenses for this additional day.

The teacher’s participation is completely voluntary. Privacy will be protected as the wiki and Elluminate Live discussions will only be open to members of our group; our September and May discussions will be audio taped and transcribed and then the tape will be destroyed. None of the data will contain the teacher’s name or the identity of the place where he or she works. Data will be secured in a locked filing cabinet and confidentiality is assured to the extent possible. My supervisor, Dr. Rebecca Luce-Kapler may also see this data.

I do not foresee any risks, discomforts or inconveniences associated with this research study. If participants choose to withdraw, there will be no penalty and their data will be destroyed and therefore, not used as part of the study. Confidentiality within the group will be requested at the outset of the project so that all participants understand that comments made during any type of discussion must remain within the group. In group discussions or postings on the wiki, teachers do not have to answer any questions that they do not want to (for example questions that make you feel uncomfortable). They are free to withdraw from the study at any time, with no penalty. The results of this study will be published in academic and professional journals and theses, as well as in book form; a pseudonym will replace the teacher’s name on all data that they provide to protect their identity. The data may also be used in the future for secondary analysis. It is my hope that our investigation will be useful for teaching writing in the Northwest Territories.

If you have any questions about this project, please contact Susan Catlin at 613-384-0478 or 6sjc3@queensu.ca or contact my supervisor, Dr. Rebecca Luce-Kapler at rebecca.luce-kapler@queensu.ca. For questions, concerns, or complaints about the research ethics of this study, please contact the Education Research Ethics Board at ereb@queensu.ca or the chair of Queen’s University General Research Ethics Board, Dr. Joan Stevenson at 613-533-6081 or chair.GREB@queensu.ca

If you agree to allow one of your teachers participate in the research study, I ask that you email me immediately so that I can recruit from the teachers from your region who are going to the Yellowknife workshop at the end of September.

Sincerely,

Susan Catlin
Appendix D
Consent Forms

CONSENT FORM
For Susan Catlin
Faculty of Education Queen’s University
Voice lessons: Writing pedagogy in the Northwest Territories

I have read and retained a copy of the letter of information concerning “Voice lessons: Writing pedagogy for the Northwest Territories” and all questions have been sufficiently answered. I am aware that the purpose of this action research is to explore the possibilities for writing practices that are responsive to places in the Northwest Territories. I am aware that I will be writing and posting my writing during these 12 sessions, as well as thinking about writing practices that are responsive to the needs of my students. I am also aware that my original writing is not part of the analysis, but may be referenced by a phrase taken from, or in a summary of the text, in order to provide a context for the collective ideas about place-based writing pedagogy that emerge out of the wiki, MSN, and face-to-face discussions.

I am fully aware that participation is voluntary and that I may request the removal of all or part of my data without any consequences to myself. I am aware that I may withdraw at any time. I have also been told that the data will be stored in a locked filing cabinet and confidentiality is assured to the extent possible.

I am aware that if I have any questions about this project, I can contact Susan Catlin at 613-384-0478 or fsjc3@queensu.ca. I know that I can contact her supervisor, Dr. Rebecca Luce-Kapler at rebecca.luce-kapler@queensu.ca. I am also aware that for questions, concerns, or complaints about the research ethics of this study, I can contact the Education Research Ethics Board, Dr. ereb@queensu.ca or the chair of Queen’s University General Research Ethics Board, Dr. Joan Stevenson at 613-533-6081 or chair.GREB@queensu.ca

Please sign one copy of this Consent Form and return to Susan Catlin. Retain the second copy for your records.

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Participant’s Name:______________________________________________________________

Signature: _____________________________________________________________________

Date: _________________________________________________________________________

Please write your email or postal address at the bottom of this sheet if you wish to receive a copy of the results of this study.
Appendix E
Sample recruitment speech

Hello, my name is Susan Catlin and I am a 3rd year doctoral student in the Faculty of Education at Queen’s University in Kingston, Ontario, but prior to that I taught in the NWT for 19 years. I would like to invite you to participate in an action research investigation into writing practices that are responsive to place. An action research is a project conducted by individuals who come together around a common purpose to reflect upon current practices, in order to maintain and share what works well and to bring about positive change. This inquiry will be conducted with 5-7 teachers from across the NWT in a writers’ workshop on a group wiki, a collaborative website where we will be able to post our writing, responses to the writing and ideas about writing practices. We will have 12 sessions (requiring one to two hours) bi-monthly from October to April. We’ll also have 7 (one hour) audio sessions on Elluminate Live to talk about our writing and the practices that we think work best with our students. An introductory workshop to the writing practices and the software platforms that we will use is scheduled for Wednesday, September 29 in Yellowknife at ECE.

I became interested in writing pedagogy which is responsive to the needs of northern students because I felt that many of my students struggled with writing and I met many other northern teachers who felt that a high proportion of their students did, too. I think northern teachers are puzzling out how to respond to the pedagogic needs of their students and I think it would be good for a group of us to come together and puzzle things out together. It is my hope that working together will lead to a better understanding of the way we need to approach the teaching of writing in the North. If you are interested in participating, please indicate your interest to Peg Pardy by Thursday, September 10 and she will send you a letter of information and consent form with further information.

Finally, I would like to assure you that this study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the Research Ethics board at my university.

Thanks, Susan Catlin