

# Critical literacy and counter-narratives: Disrupting power and enhancing inclusivity in the LINC classroom

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Many immigrants come to Canada not understanding the long and complex history it has with its Indigenous people, colonization, residential school system, and the impact of this on Indigenous communities. As a result, many newcomers learn negative stereotypes about Indigenous people because of their representation in the media and literature. Therefore, there is a pressing need to educate ourselves and Canadian newcomers about the true Canadian history. It is important to examine it from different angles and a “need to learn to read again the exhibition of the world, to see the display of the civilized and the primitive” (Willinsky, 1998, p. 86) as history topics have only ever been taught from one point of view of the majority group. So, critical literacy should be adopted as a tool in LINC classrooms to equip newcomer students with essential skills to be effective citizens in a pluralistic and democratic society.

## The need to move beyond Eurocentric narratives

Several researchers argue that the current Canadian educational systems “favor ethnocentric thinking and are positioned in a Eurocentric model” (Smith, 2016, p. 49). Canadian newcomers attend ESL and LINC classes to improve their English language and learn about Canadian culture and history. The main goal of these classes is to help them to settle in Canada and develop skills for interaction in a culturally diverse environment, to enrich and strengthen the social and cultural fabric of Canadian multicultural society. However, examining the curriculum indicates that there is a small part allocated to Indigenous history and the legacy of residential schools. This lack of knowledge may result in developing prejudices against the Indigenous communities. Battiste (2013) argues that educators “must reject the colonial curricula that offer students the fragmented and distorted picture of Indigenous people and offer students a critical perspective of the historical context that created that fragmentation” (p. 186). Most importantly, educators need to make sure to revise the material that mute the voices of the marginalized, combat the single narrative of Canadian history trying to bridge the gap, and provide a space for transformative learning.

In his talk, *Seeing Each Other*, Duncan McCue (2014) criticizes how the Canadian media and literature “has propped up colonialism...reinforcing instead policies about land’s dispossession and assimilation which are accepted norms in Canada” highlighting the need to move beyond the same tired narratives. Moreover, the



Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's Call to Action #93 demanded the federal government to revise the information kit for newcomers to Canada, its citizenship test, and the study guide to reflect a more inclusive history of the diverse Indigenous peoples of Canada including information about the Treaties and the history of residential schools. So, it is clear that there are important procedures to be taken to ensure increasing the diversity of stories and perspectives to include voices from diverse groups in the curriculum. More importantly, educators should be aware of this current issue that has not been resolved yet and try to provide their learners with critical literacy skills to uncover such injustices enabling them to examine, challenge societal norms, and be ready to take stance.

What is a critical literacy approach and why should it be used as a tool to stimulate change in the LINC and citizenship classes?

## Critical literacy as a tool to promote social justice

Critical literacy approaches multimodal texts as a tool “for representing and reshaping possible worlds” (Luke & Dolley, 2011, p. 856) providing an avenue for both educators and learners “to inform themselves of injustices in their communities, empower themselves with the knowledge to make decisions, and take action” (Amgott, 2018, p. 329). The functions and goals of critical literacy are most concisely defined by the four dimensions disrupting the commonplace, interrogating multiple viewpoints, focusing on sociopolitical issues, and taking action to promote social justice (Lewison et al., 2002). By adopting this approach in the LINC classroom, learners can examine human rights issues and recognize forms of discrimination while studying Canadian history and culture. David Austin (2010) challenges the “official narratives that Canada tells itself about its history and identity” as they “facilitate the contemporary exercise of power” (p. 1). So, it is very important for educators who teach Canadian history and culture to make learning real and examine the information, view it with a critical lens, evaluate it from multiple perspectives, and connect the new information to their learners' lives. These measures are necessary as Powell (1999) suggests to “enhance our capacity for altruism” when they are used “as a means for seeing the world differently—so that we might begin to construct a more humane and compassionate society” (p. 20). By moving beyond the Eurocentric narratives, learners will not only become aware of the true history, but they will be able to read it from the point of view of the marginalized groups and be ready to take part against inequalities and prejudices.

I dig deeper into this omission in the curriculum by questioning what newcomer students across LINC and Citizenship classes already know about Treaties and residential schools and how educators are tackling the topic in their classrooms. It is also worthwhile to examine what sources influence this ongoing gap in understanding, as well as teachers' mindsets and alternative resources that can equip students with tools to evaluate bias and take action.

## Questions to ponder:

1. What stories are educators drawing on as they engage on citizenship or Canadian history education?
2. Why are some narratives more widely used than others?
3. What is behind the misrepresentation of Indigenous people in Canadian history?
4. Are we willing to do anything regarding the omission of the residential schools and the Treaty in the citizenship tool kit and LINC curriculum?
5. How can Indigenous voices be used in the classroom to drive change?
6. How can we increase awareness of Indigenous histories, cultures, and perspectives in our classrooms?
7. How do we ensure that Indigenous perspectives are embedded in our lessons?
8. Do we actually facilitate the Truth and Reconciliation when we teach Canadian history?

## Counter-narratives as a tool to disrupt power and give voice

To appeal to diverse learners and fit current and local contexts, there is a need to modify the current resources available to adult newcomer students to include multimodal materials that engage Truth and Reconciliation education in depth. Alternative resources that provide diverse narratives to evaluate and enhance stories can be included in the citizenship and LINC curricula. These texts that aim to question power and authority will help confront “the hidden standards of racism, colonialism, and cultural and linguistic imperialism in the modern curriculum” as well as to uncover “the line between truth and propaganda” (Battiste, 2013, p. 29). Opening space for counter-narratives can be a promising tool to ensure educational equity in our diverse classrooms and schools. Counter-storytelling is seen by many as “means of exposing and critiquing normalized dialogues that perpetuate racial stereotypes” (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004, p. 27). These counter-narratives are proposed as a method for revealing, analyzing, and challenging single stories working as a powerful source for multiple perspectives and challenging misrepresentation and stereotypes.

Newcomer students need to know how to critically evaluate texts and media not assuming the author’s viewpoint is both accurate and equitable because the common practice of not questioning the authors’ intentions can unconsciously strengthen stereotypes and cultural gaps. For instance, *Discover Canada* study guide (2012) prepares newcomers for the citizenship test and heavily focuses on the positive encounter between the Europeans and the Indigenous ignoring the truth of colonization and its legacy where they are taught that “Aboriginals and Europeans formed strong economic, religious and military bonds in the first 200 years of coexistence which laid the foundations of Canada” (p. 14). It is a narrative that fails to educate newcomers on the truthful historical past of oppression and the horrors of residential schools. It is obvious that the citizenship curriculum should be changed similarly to the Canadian Citizenship Oath that has been modified recently to recognize Indigenous rights. On June 21, 2021, Canada’s Oath had been updated in response to the Truth and Reconciliation Call to Action. The new Oath includes Indigenous,



Inuit, and Métis rights and will help new Canadians better understand the role of Indigenous peoples, the ongoing impact of colonialism and residential schools, and the collective obligation to uphold the treaties (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2021).

## LINC resources that can aid diversity and inclusivity

### Adichie's TED Talk

Adichie's (2009) talk *The danger of a single story* can be used to help newcomer learners understand the danger of single stories. It encompasses all elements of critical literacy, helps students to interrogate societal issues, and encourages multiple perspectives to critique the structures that serve as norms. Also, it can help them have an increasing awareness of systems of power and oppression, to recognize and challenge deficit perspectives of peoples and cultures as there is no one story. Adichie highlights how stories about peoples and places are tools by those with power control; "stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair the broken dignity" (Adichie, 2009). She stresses the importance of telling many stories in many different voices to ensure that we get at the complexity and diversity of people's experiences. "Start the story with the arrows of the Native Americans, and not with the arrival of the British, and you have an entirely different story" (Adichi, 2009). It is very important to introduce our students to texts that require them to confront and reveal any biases in their lived experiences and communities by screening texts carefully and selecting those that merit inclusion.

### Thomas King's *I'm not the Indian you had in mind*

Another resource that can be used to challenge the stereotypical portrayal of First Nations is the short film by Thomas King: *I'm not the Indian you had in mind*. This video encourages the viewers to examine the Canadian identity, culture, and perceptions of Indigenous peoples. It encourages viewers to investigate the impact of the one-dimensional media representations in shaping our perspectives of others. It also helps students think about the relationship between political policy and cultural representations, and more importantly, the role that colonialism plays in the construction and promotion of such stereotypes.

### *The Indigenous perspective guide*

For a more comprehensive understanding of Canada's history, it is important to include Indigenous perspectives when teaching Canadian history and the nation creation. *The Indigenous perspective guide* aims to engage students in thinking critically about our historical narratives and help them consider how both individual and collective worldviews form and are shaped by history. It will help Canadian newcomers



develop awareness of the legacy of colonialism and the repressive policies to which Indigenous communities have been subjected, the contributions of Indigenous people, and to stand against any prejudice and ignorance.

## **Six String Nation**

The Six String Nation project can help newcomers understand the true Canadian history and identity as it reflects on different stories and multiple backgrounds and perspectives. It can foster a safe, inclusive, and transformative learning environment as it embodies the countless stories of a truly diverse Canada. The goal of the creation of Six String Nation was to present “a talking stick for all who wished to share their story and a common touchstone for a complex polity...It has been part of Canada Day festivities...It has also insistently told the story of residential schools and other abuses of indigenous people by the Canadian system and I have always believed that it could hold those two identities” (Taylor, 2021). Bringing the story of creating a single object (a guitar) from significant materials that are gathered from different cultures, communities, characters, and events to represent the nation can give students opportunities to broaden their views and develop their self-identities in positive ways.

## **Predicted outcomes**

These four resources, among others, can support facilitating truth and reconciliation by presenting diverse valued perspectives that make up our history and nation. In addition, these materials can open room for a more diverse and inclusive environment by giving voice to the marginalized groups and questioning history texts by providing multiple perspectives.

## **Developing active and critical citizens**

By bringing diverse voices into the LINC classroom, Indigenous stories become real, and newcomers can gain awareness about the Indigenous realities and avoid the traditional societal prejudice affecting the Canadian society. This sort of critical teaching and learning within the citizenship curriculum will allow newcomers to voice their concerns while opening new avenues for them to connect to their personal experiences and prepare them to be critical and active citizens. Besides helping students acquire citizenship skills, these resources support the development of critical skills such as respecting and considering others' perspectives, highlighting the importance of providing students with opportunities to explore the depth and diverse experiences of Indigenous peoples in our land. As well, they examine the legacy and consequences of colonialism and the repressive policies to which Indigenous peoples have been subjected. They will act as a tool to critique society and attempt to make positive change by helping both educators and learners to understand the complexity of cultural, social, and personal differences that influence our understanding of social justice issues.



## Teaching an accurate and complete history

We always need to understand the value of analyzing instructional materials as some instructors may have never questioned the validity of teaching standards of the curriculum before. Educators should have a social and moral responsibility to teach students an accurate and more complete history of Indigenous peoples to help them develop an awareness of biases and inspire them to act against injustices. This will help “identify the holes in the story of our country and note what has been left out. This is necessary, not to lay blame, but to repair the story” (Donald, 2010, pp. 2–3). Educators will greatly benefit understanding the importance of presenting students with multiple viewpoints of content, allowing them to build an understanding of the history of Indigenous peoples and examine how colonialism has and continues to impact them. There is a need to be sure that our curriculum changes to reflect more dialogue, courtesy, and diversity of viewpoints as newcomers account for a large portion of Canada’s population.

## Resisting discrimination and racism

Indigenous communities’ experiences with assimilation, discrimination, and racism have lasting impact on their health and well-being. There are assimilative pressures practiced on these groups by the dominant society to forget one’s roots, voice, and true identity. Counter-narratives should be used when teaching newcomers to disrupt racialized violence and exclusions that occur daily in our society. Dominant narratives of Canadian history can be retold by educators by using diverse texts that open dialogue for historical thinking. It will help open our eyes to the issue of how some cultures are more likely to experience systemic racism which hinders their integration into Canadian society.

## Conclusion

The critical literacy approach and counter-narratives would be particularly useful in contemporary multicultural classrooms where educators will be able to examine societal problems and eventually change learning into tangible movements to expose and address inequalities (Amgott, 2018). Then, newcomer students from different cultural backgrounds can share their personal experiences, histories, and have a voice against any misrepresentation while learning the true history of Canada and its diverse cultures. This article is a call to my colleagues in the field to have the potential to help make Truth and Reconciliation a reality and to create a fairer and more inclusive nation by questioning why years of teaching Canadian history from one viewpoint was ever considered to be a valid form of instruction. Thus, educators not only present the role of rights and resistance in shaping our history but provide models of informed civic engagement. This requires designing classroom materials that help students interrogate societal issues and encourage considering multiple perspectives to critique the structures that serve as norms. Also, instructors



have the power to design and create the capacity in learners to see the world broadly by raising awareness that differences in opinions and cultures are accepted and encouraged in and beyond the classroom. By adopting critical literacy as a tool to enable students to gain power, to have a voice against stereotypes and misconceptions, to share their histories and their stories, educators can help learners create social awareness and question injustices and systems of power and oppression.

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