

# **Fact or Fiction? A critical assessment of an alternative framework for knowledge construction using fiction to explore issues around identity and citizenship for education students in Canadian universities**

The stories we tell reveal how we think of ourselves and the society in which we live. This paper draws upon research from a SSHRC study to explore how studying fiction writing in a national context may provide an alternative framework for knowledge construction around identity and citizenship issues for pre-service teachers and graduate education students. Canadian fiction has played an important role in fostering a sense of national identity while policies around multiculturalism have shaped the increasingly multi-faceted representation of different identities within citizenship discourses, a topic frequently explored within Canadian fiction. By exploring heterogeneous representations of Canadian experience within literature, and considering how different understandings of citizenship shape perspectives of Canadian fiction writers, educators may be able to critically expand and (re)construct their own knowledge and understanding of citizenship in a more sophisticated and cosmopolitan way, leading to more inclusive teaching practices.

## **The research study**

This qualitative research study includes a) content analysis of literature and policy documents, b) life histories with Canadian authors, and c) interviews with ‘key informants’ in the publishing, policy and education sector.

## **Canadian fiction writing**

Holden (2000) argues that Canada has established its own literary tradition, distinct from British literature, which is important for creating a unique sense of national identity. At the same time, Kroetch’s (2004) essay on ‘Unity as Disunity: A Canadian Strategy’ argues that Canadian identity is characterized by its marginality and multiplicity, resisting a singular form of narrative. Young (2001) believes that Canada’s policies on multiculturalism have fostered diverse representation of identities and experiences in national fiction writing.

## **Educators learning about identity and citizenship**

Given that educators are increasingly working in diverse settings with learners from varied backgrounds, it is important to explore alternative strategies for creating knowledge and gaining insights into cultural, economic and political complexities that shape our teaching contexts. Issues around identity and citizenship are increasingly prominent within educational discourses. Lefebvre (2008) notes a challenge in preparing educators is that many naively believe that the national policies on multiculturalism reflect Canadian reality. However, as the UK scholar, Ian Martin argues, ‘we live in an increasingly globalized system of production, distribution and exchange that systematically generates very different and unequal conditions of citizenship’ (2003, p. 572).

## **Fiction and learning about citizenship**

Lefebvre (2008) explores fiction works by Canadian writers to assess whether using these texts can help prepare educators to understand the complexity of Canadian

identities and experiences, coming to a somewhat ambivalent conclusion. Similarly, Maxwell (2006) critiques Naussbaum's (2001) notion that reading fiction is sufficient to create empathy for other people's experiences, or to develop more compassionate citizens. This suggests that to use fiction as a means of creating a social justice orientation amongst novice educators requires a more sophisticated critical approach towards knowledge construction around identity and citizenship.

### **The role of higher education in fostering new approaches to knowledge development**

A university education cannot treat knowledge around topics as complex as identity and citizenship as static concepts that can be delivered didactically, but rather must incorporate learning strategies that create a process of engagement that requires learners to be critically reflective around their own and other's experiences.

Maclellan discusses 'how students use their conceptions of knowledge and knowing to develop an understanding of the world' (2005, p. 130), noting that in traditional teaching, knowledge is treated as a commodity to be passed from one person to another. While constructivism recognizes learners' ability to create knowledge and engage in reflective practice, she argues that 'conceptual learning' involves both high-road types of learning that involve extracting essential knowledge from experience, the ability to abstract and make connections to different contexts, and then actually effect change by altering one's actions (or in this case, teaching practices). At the same time, critical educators realize that learners must be offered theoretical frameworks and opportunities for dialogue to provide insights into linkages between personal experiences and global concerns (Martin, 2003).

A critical framework for learning around identity and citizenship issues for educators may be fostered by a) encouraging learners to not only read about the experiences of others, but also research how these stories emerged (ie. who wrote this and why – what has shaped their life's experiences to create these kinds of characters and stories?), b) to consider how fictional stories mesh (or differ) from learner's perceptions of citizenship, c) to question the material, cultural and social frameworks that shape this society and these stories, e) to consider whether these novels are accurate or insightful reflections of the experiences that their own students/learners might have, and finally, f) to critically consider why it is important for an educator to understand these different kinds of experiences and assess how they might address this in their own teaching practices.

### **Implications**

Fostering conceptual learning within a critical framework to explore connections between lifelong learning, citizenship, and fiction writing may develop a knowledge framework that supports more holistic and inclusive teaching practices for both teacher and graduate education candidates, thus challenging the commodification of learning.

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