Song: A Medium for Literacy Development

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Literacy is sometimes narrowly defined as a level of reading and writing below which a certain percentage of the population falls. This is the interpretation based on literacy surveys. Literacy may also be defined from a broader contextual base and refer to a person's attitude towards, and use of reading and writing, language, and numeracy to bring meaning to, and make sense out of one's life. Courts (1991) argues for such a broad definition of literacy: "The word literacy, then suggests a state of being and a set of capabilities through which the literate individual is able to utilize the interior world of self to act upon and interact with the exterior structures of the world around him/her in order to make sense of self and other" (p. 4) in order to construct his/her own reality. The person, not the task, becomes the focus of the literacy definition. Within this framework the purpose of this paper is to show that song is an effective medium for literacy development.

Song as Literacy and Empowerment

Within a contextual, person-oriented definition of literacy, all forms of language including song, are integral to literacy functioning. According to Macedo (1991) traditional approaches to literacy "all ignore the role of language as a major force in the construction of human subjectivities. In other words, they ignore the way language may either confirm or deny the life histories and experiences of the people who use it" (p. ix). The language of song is an important part of literacy. Song is every bit a form of literacy as is written text - it necessitates meaning construction, and embodies voice (Walmsley, 1991).

Song is empowering in that it is an expression of individual consciousness, a mechanism of situating oneself within an historical and cultural identity, and a social medium of communication in bringing to the consciousness of others all that the culture entails, both past and present. Literacy is integral to an individual's search for identity (Freire and Macedo, 1987). Mitchell and Weiler (1991) state that "If a politics of difference is to be fashioned in emancipatory rather than oppressed practices, literacy must be rewritten in terms that articulate differences with the principles of equality, justice, and freedom rather than with those interests supportive of hierarchies, oppression and exploitation. In this case, literacy as emancipatory practice requires people to write, speak, (sing) and listen in the language of difference, a language in which meaning becomes multicultural,

dispersed and resistant to permanent closure. This is a language in which one speaks *with* rather than *for* others" (p. x). There is no doubt that song can be such a language and literacy.

While print literacy allows one to make sense of the world through the processes of reading and writing, and oral language operates via listening and speaking, the literacy of song involves print (composing or dissemination) and oral language, but transcends all of these language modes by adding rhythm and invoking emotion much more readily than can print on a page. Frederick (1979) and Langer (1987) stress the significance of emotion in literacy expression. Langer argues that emotion is "crucial for cognition to be effected" (p. 69). Song usually accompanies a social gathering - a more receptive situation than often occurs for print. Postman (1978) points out that print is inclined to induce passivity while song, on the other hand, affects one's entire sensorum and fosters active participation. The significance of emotion in political and personal empowerment is highlighted by Courts (1991) who states, "it gives me the power to transform myself, to move inside and outside of minds and worlds that exist by virtue of the printed text. Sometimes it makes me angry, other times happy, often puzzled. Sometimes tired and frustrated, or guilty, or energized. Sometimes it makes me feel both alone and embraced, all in a single moment" (p. xxi).

Interpreting Song Within a Model of Cultural Action

In order to understand the literacy of song as a form of expression and empowerment, it is important to provide a cultural model within which song takes its existence and identity. Such a model can be adapted from the work of Ogbu (1990) who states that cultural and language differences should not be seen as barriers to be overcome; rather they are best interpreted "as symbols of identity" (p. 527). The cultural frame of reference of a people "gives them both a sense of collective social identity and a sense of self-worth" (p. 527). A modification of Ogbu's model is presented as Figure 1.

Historical, structural, and psychological antecedents provide an umbrella - a framework - for the interpretation of one's social reality. People are what they are
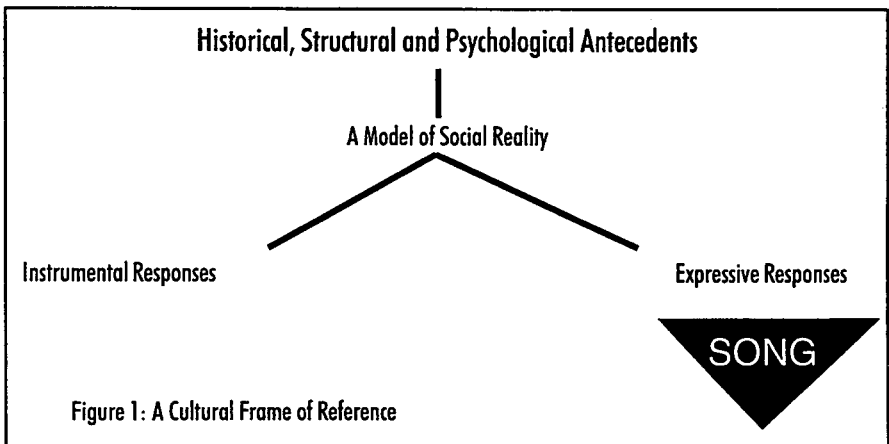

Figure 1: A Cultural Frame of Reference

largely because of the prior forces within their cultures, their nation, and their community. Even in a country as diverse as Canada, there are common values, customs, and social structures because there were major common forces operating at a national level; yet at the same time, within areas or pockets of the country, different conceptualizations of person and life have arisen, because of a different past, a different set of customs, traditions, or values.

Ogbu indicates there is collective strength amongst people when a nation, state, or community (defined as broadly and as narrowly as possibly) shares in the interpretation of its social reality. Within this social reality, there is constant occasion for people to respond to forces impinging on their lives, whether in accessing the basics of food, clothing, and shelter, coping with the increase in crime, or meeting the need for improved literacy expertise. These responses are both instrumental and expressive in nature; instrumental, since they involve action, and expressive since action encompasses feeling and are therefore interdependent. Akinnaso (1991) points out that one's individual consciousness comprises the totality of an individual's knowledge, skills, thoughts, beliefs, experiences, and feelings, and the way they are represented in behaviour. He maintains that a symbiotic relationship exists between instrumental and expressive responses. Any literacy program must capitalize on this symbiotic relationship; this is in contrast to many literacy programs which pay little attention to the emotional forces often controlling peoples' energy and commitment. Using song as a medium of literacy is a significant avenue in emphasizing the instrumental-expressive, the action-reaction, and the thinking-feeling aspect of literacy.

An Analysis of Song as Literacy and Cultural Expression

The data for analysis were collected in Newfoundland. Like any other geographic area,Newfoundland was shaped by historical, social, and psychological forces. Newfoundland has a long history of hardships, from the struggles for early settlement recognition, to suspension of its government by Britain in the 1930's, to the Depression, to the divisiveness among its people of becoming a province of Canada, to the present closure of its fishery due to the scarcity of fishstocks, and to the out-migration of larger numbers of its people. According to literacy surveys, the illiteracy rate in Newfoundland is the highest in Canada (Statistics Canada, 1992).

While the people are limited in terms of the physical action they can take in these circumstances, they are not passive in the face of such forces. One part of the Newfoundland culture and heritage that has helped the province and its people is the capacity to respond expressively via song. Song is voice and as Hirshman (1970) states, "voice is nothing but a basic portion and function of any political system known sometimes as 'internal articulation'" (p. 30).

In order to get a sense of the issues that the people address in song, two hundred and twenty three recorded songs, by Newfoundlanders about Newfoundland, were selected for analysis. These represented the corpus of songs available through local music stores and published lists. It was not always possible to tell the date of recording but about 90 percent would have been recorded since 1970. An attempt was made to avoid the traditional "classics" of Newfoundland music (Jack Was Every Inch a Sailor, The Star of Logy Bay, Tickle Cove Pond, etc.) which

may not have been typical of songs recorded in more recent years.

The songs were analysed from a number of perspectives including topic categorization, nature of resolution (positive or negative) of the issue/concern, time focus (past, present, or future), and emotion displayed. The data classification was verified by an independent researcher and a 93 percent agreement was obtained.

Results of the Analysis

Table 1

Topics of Song (Percentage of Total)

Category	Instances	Resolution	
		Yes	No
Economic issues	48	15	33
Home	47	13	34
Social issues	46	4	42
Love/lost love	28	7	21
Humour	20	3	17
Historical change	16	1	15
Disaster	14	1	13
Political issues	4	1	4
Totals:	223	45	178

Topic

Eight main topics formed the focus of the songs, three of which dominated. These were economic issues, home, and social issues. Occupying a mid-focus were the topics of love/lost love, and humour. Historical change, disaster, and political issues as topics, occurred less often.

The majority of economic issues, as might be expected, related to the fishery. What is perhaps striking is that for 80 percent of the songs, there was no resolution. The situation or event was narrated but no closure was provided. Sometimes, the situation was seen as fatalistic and nature would eventually take its course; other times, the issue was posed almost as a problem, with the audi-

ence (listeners) left to use their own imagination as to how the situation may eventually unfold, or to merely linger in a particular emotional state.

Time focus.

Over one-half of the songs focussed on the present with approximately 40 percent directed at the past. An insignificant number dealt with the future. This is consistent with the Newfoundland culture where the present is always of focal concern, and wisdom and direction is often taken from the past. It is not uncommon for people to say, "The future is in God's hands, my dear. We can only do our best now and hope for the best to come." It is not that the future is not considered, but living the present as best as one can, is often seen as the best preparation for the future.

Expressed emotion

Songs were almost equally divided between positive and negative emotion. Almost one-half of the songs which dealt with positive emotion focussed on happiness in who we are and what we are. Joy over life's blessings was also part of happiness. About one-fifth of the songs dealt with pride - pride in being a Newfoundlander or Labradorian. Humour, always a trait associated with Newfoundlanders, accounted for 10 percent of the songs displaying positive emotion.

Just over one-half of the songs with negative emotion dealt with sadness. Very often these were personal type stories, particularly songs of lost love, having to leave home, or the death of a loved one. Feelings of extreme sadness (tragic) were always tied to disasters, usually sea disasters, whether shipwreck, loss of crews on sealing ships, or in more recent years, the loss of lives in an oil exploration venture. Depression accounted for 18 percent of negative emotion and as might be expected, related mainly to current happenings in the fishery. Depression as an expressed emotion was related to seeing the people as victims of outside forces who fear for their future.

Using Song in Literacy Development

Literacy is about possessing voice as well as about developing competency in reading and writing. Song can be used effectively for both purposes. Songs are motivational as they involve not only learners' cognition but their emotions. Songs are familiar especially when learners are encouraged to bring their favourite songs to class for analysis and discussion.

An abbreviated form of a plan for using song in literacy development is found in the Appendix.

Conclusion

In song, as in written language, there is a composer/author, an intended audience, and a message/concern, etc.. In fact, the language of song, may be found in written as well as in oral form. Song may bring to the consciousness of

others various issues and concerns. Song is an ideal medium for exploring, using and teaching language as a form of literacy. As Courts (1991) states, it enables the composer to transform him/herself; it provides an outlet for a range of emotions. The accompanying music is not so much a means of providing rhythm for the word but for portraying the emotion of the composer/singer. But song is not only an expression of intellectual action and emotion, it also fosters empowerment.

Freire and Macedo (1987) state that "Educators must develop radical pedagogical structures that provide students with the opportunity to use their own reality as a basis of literacy. This includes, obviously, the language they bring to the classroom" (p. 151). They go on to say, "the students' language is the only means by which they can develop their own voice, a prerequisite to the development of a positive self-worth" (p. 151) and to the development of literacy as part of a cultural identity.

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Appendix

Plan for Using Song for Literacy Development

(Only selected questions are presented here. The full plan may be found in Fagan, 1997.)

1. *Introduce the Song and Topic*
   Write the title of the song on the board/chart.
   "What comes to your mind when you hear —"?
   Play a recording of the song.
2. *Identifying an Issue/Concern*
   "Is there a concern here"?
3. *Examining Both Sides of the Issue*
   "Is there another side to this concern; that is, would people have different views about this concern"?
4. *Determining Author -Audience Relationships*
   "Why do you think the composer/author wrote this song"?
   "What effect do you think the composer/author wanted to create"?
5. *Giving Feedback*
   Provide positive feedback in response to the learners' participation.
6. *Listening and Reading*
   Hand out copies of the printed words of the song.
   Play the song again, and have learners follow along with the text.
7. *Instrumental/Emotional Response: Writing*
   "What is your reaction as you listen to this issue/concern"?
   "How could you express your reaction in writing"?
8. *Instrumental/Emotional Response: Other Action*
   This step would be optional depending on the nature of the issue, its currency, impact, etc., and the writing activity above.
   "What can you do about this issue"?
9. *Engaging in Word Study (for those at the lower literacy levels)*
   "From the top of your head, tell me which words were important to you in talking about (name the issue)".
10. *Revisiting the Song/Issue*
    Have copies of the song (cassette, CD) available so that learners may listen to them at a later time.

Note: