

Skunk Girl Goes to School:

A literacy practitioner's
return to academia

by **Nancy Cooper**

The night before I was to start graduate school at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto (OISE/UT), my dog was sprayed by a skunk on our evening walk. Needless to say, she wasn't the only one who smelled offensive after our altercation with the potent little creature. Great, I thought, my first day of school and my new nickname is going to be Skunk Girl. But people were kind and said they could hardly smell anything. Looking back, I think this experience was a perfect metaphor for my fears about going back to school after a long absence of twelve years. I was going to stick out, to not belong, but I was going to try my best and get what I came for. And, fortunately for me, my experience has been a wonderful, affirming one that has helped me to become a better person and educator.

For the past decade I have worked in Ontario within the Native literacy community. I began my career as the literacy coordinator at a downtown Toronto Native women's resource centre. At that time, the literacy program was in the basement of a building, and in the mornings I would sometimes have to clear out the dead rats before getting to my day. From day one of being a literacy practitioner, I was hooked because I was working with people who were finding a stronger sense of self through skills building. These were people who,



despite the odds stacked against them, had dreams and goals and knew that literacy was one of the ways to achieve them. Building a culture-based literacy program allowed me to learn more about myself as a Native woman while setting the stage for learning to take place in an environment that affirmed Indigenous knowledges and cultural practices. From there I moved on to work provincially and nationally in the Native literacy community. The work I do now is with a provincial literacy resource centre and the numerous Native literacy programs all over Ontario. I am involved with curriculum development, computer training, distance learning and program evaluation.

It is and has been very rewarding work, but two years ago I felt the need to return to school. I needed to take a break and focus my attention on building my skills in an academic setting so that I could return to the community energized and refreshed and able to tackle old and new issues in new ways. To see the world with new eyes.

Many of us, as Aboriginal people, are alone most of the time. In our workplaces and in our communities of choice we often find ourselves the only one or one of only a few. Living in the city as I have for the past thirteen years, I've been fortunate to work in my community in a variety of ways. But for the past five years I've worked in an organization in which I was the only Aboriginal person. So it was with great longing and excitement that I began graduate school because I knew that I would have a community of people around me who knew who I was and where I came from. I could just be in a way that opens up the mind and allows one to grow. I researched schools with this in mind. I knew I couldn't go back to school without this kind of

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community to help me. I knew that I wouldn't be able to succeed in my course of study without these faces, these experiences, this knowing around me to buoy me up and keep me grounded with both feet on the ground and my eyes on the stars. On my first day and in my first class I experienced this community of peers in a wonderful and profound way. The professor spoke in her language, other Aboriginal students located themselves by language, location, spiritual practice and culture, and I felt at home in a way that I'm sure not many people feel in academic circles. I was surrounded by the language and culture of the Cree of Manitoba and Saskatchewan, the Algonquin of Quebec, and of my own Ojibway background. These things were acknowledged as important parts of knowing and of who we are as Aboriginal scholars. This naming of ourselves and placing ourselves in the world would continue and become an integral part of several of the courses I was to take at OISE/UT. In this way, we were and are claiming our rightful place at the table and acknowledging that we are not alone in the pursuit of our degrees. Our ancestors sit at the tables with us, watching, smiling and even goading us on sometimes. Our descendants sit at the table too, watching and cheering us on.

**Round Dance
by Sarain Stump**

Don't break this circle
Before the song is over
Because all of our people
Even the ones long gone
Are holding hands.

Aboriginal people have a knowledge base that is ancient, one that has been threatened by colonialism and racism throughout the past 500 plus years. During my time at OISE/UT, I've come to see that it is our job as educators to recover and uncover this knowledge and celebrate all the ways of knowing that make us, as Aboriginal people, who we are. We need to learn and relearn how to read the signs, read the wind, read the world in the ways we were always meant to in addition to picking up the very important learning

and skills found in graduate school. This kind of literacy/knowledge is something that has long interested me as a literacy worker in the Native community. It is the unspoken for many adult learners because of years of being made to feel ashamed of who they are and what they know. Because of the educational system and its effects on our communities, whole generations of people have grown up believing these very things. Knowing about our past—how we got here, and what makes us who we are—enables us to place ourselves in today and look to the future with clear eyes and a knowing heart. This is what literacy means to me. This is what Aboriginal education means to me.

As an educator working in the Aboriginal community, I believe it is my duty to continually create an environment whereby learners can learn about the richness of their cultures and about the many contributions to mainstream society our societies have provided, both willingly and against our collective will. My sadness and anger go hand in hand when I



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think of the way that I was educated to believe that Aboriginal people were a simple people, conquered and needing to accept being assimilated for any good to happen for them. Aboriginal people had simple traditions, folklore and a belief in the great mystery or Creator, but they didn't have science and technology and 'advanced' knowledge. As educators, we have a lot of unlearning to do for ourselves in order that others can unlearn as well. Decolonizing the education we received is a long and arduous but rewarding journey. For at the end of that journey we return to a knowing that sustains us in the face of those who would tell us we are less than, quaint and primitive, a vanishing part of Canadiana. Aboriginal people are reclaiming this knowledge and in some part reclaiming that which was stolen/suppressed through forced relocation to residential schools, adoptions, and by simply being part of the mainstream education system. I was taught to, yet again, appreciate the knowledge system that I come from that is tens of thousands of years old, and to open

myself up to continue learning from this system. I am reminded that knowledge comes in many forms, and that cleansing and healing happens in the body as well as in the mind and that one is not more important than the other. I see Aboriginal literacy as a type of archaeological recovery work in the sense that we need to uncover, celebrate and learn from the gifts people already have and to work towards healing and recovery while helping people learn the skills needed for survival in the mainstream community. We need to relook at what is commonly accepted as valid knowledge (found in white, colonial, mainstream educational practices) and cherish all the ways we learn and know.

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Looking back over the past year and a half, and with a thesis looming large on my horizon, I sit and smile at the memories that were stirred up while writing this article. Going back to school has had its struggles and its triumphs. I've cried and shared my pain with others and they with me. I've held an eagle feather in my hands and spoken my truth in circle. I've participated in ceremony. I've learned so much about myself. I've pulled at least one all-nighter writing up against a deadline. I've laughed, a lot. The Trickster has lived within me during my time at OISE/UT and that's been good. I've made some dear friends. I've learned and enriched my mind, my body and my spirit. What better way to continue on my learning journey? ■

Portions of this article first appeared in a paper I wrote for an Aboriginal World Views course in my first year at OISE/UT.

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SOURCES:

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