

Folklore and Literacy: A View from Nova Scotia

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Article abstract

This article describes a pilot project in museum based literacy learning that took place in Windsor, Nova Scotia in the autumn of 1999. The author coordinated the project in close consultation with a local literacy practitioner. The Windsor study was part of a national project undertaken by the Canadian Museums Association and funded by a SSHRC Strategic Research Grant Initiative. The project attracted four female participants, although one left before completing her research for personal reasons. The women chose objects as topics for study, and were given assistance with research and documentation techniques. As a discourse involving traditions of expressive behaviour and worldview, folklore plays an important role in literacy education. Specifically, this discussion examines the interactions between the participants, their chosen topics, and the museum environments, and underscores the need for an understanding of value, class, gender and contexts of use in an appreciation of literacy. A review of relevant literature is included, focusing on ethnographic studies of literacy with particular emphasis on recent work in Atlantic Canada. Outcomes of the study and future directions for this kind of community based, qualitative research are also discussed.

FOLKLORE AND LITERACY: A VIEW FROM NOVA SCOTIA

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As a folklorist, I understand that part of the work of folklore research involves identifying and describing meaningful patterns of experience in everyday life. Ideally, this work at least attempts to balance a sense of the original articulation of those patterns for the individuals and groups who create them with the inevitable influences that the researcher brings to bear on her interpretation. Such standards of practice help ensure that our work is “grounded always in experience — our own and that of the subjects of our study” (Doucette 1997: 24). I also believe that folklore, as the study of traditional expressive cultures however broadly or narrowly defined, makes a significant contribution to our understanding of how people maintain their cultural identities and cope with rapid and profound change on comprehensible local levels. In the midst of a global knowledge economy that seems to have lost perspective on the supply and demand for “data,” the importance of the discipline’s place in current discourse cannot be overlooked.

Nevertheless, as a social paradigm, the so-called “Information Age” casts up a timely challenge to folklore’s conceptual connection to the marginal. In many western societies, technology serves to multiply and diffuse centres of human activity. Companies merge and consumer choice is both diversified and narrowed; access to information is increased, but access to the tools or skills needed to transform it into working knowledge for the majority of the population is not. As centres multiply and become increasingly hard to demarcate, so do margins and the people who find themselves occupying them. While literacy has traditionally been seen as a means of social progress, in an economy that privileges the (electronic) word, it becomes a basic component of survival. Over the past decade, numerous federal and provincial

government reports and initiatives have pointed to alarmingly low literacy rates in many parts of the country, and warned of the need to improve the education level of working and employable adults so that they are equipped to make the transitions required for the “new economy.” Current academic funding emphases are also reflecting this theme, such as the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada’s “Valuing Literacy in Canada” program, which encourages partnerships between scholars and literacy groups and practitioners in order to address this pervasive need.

Folklore has a strategic role to play in literacy education. Not only are folklorists often concerned with understanding how oral traditions shape contemporary cultural expressions and function in the informal education of diverse groups, but also our research practices can help draw attention to resources within communities that can be used to create awareness of local learning opportunities. I am not saying it takes a folklorist — or any other kind of academic — to bring these community partnerships about. However, another pair of eyes, another skill set and another perspective on what is possible can be often beneficial.

Labrie has examined connections between folklore and literacy from a number of angles. Her unique and systematic approach to the development of a topology of folktales has demonstrated some of the distinctive ways francophone storytellers map the landscape and social/ecological relationships of particular kinds of *märchen* without an alphabetical orientation to the story-text (1983). Furthermore, by borrowing from Lewin’s field theory and Bronfenbrenner’s work on developmental ecology, Labrie shows how the interrelated systems of relationships and environments in the tales closely reflect the experiences of tellers and audiences (1994). Her 1987 collection of essays, *Alphabétisé-e-s!* represents a seminal ethnographic study of readership and the literacy process in the lives of several individuals. Many contemporary and later works in cultural studies would concentrate on what was read, but not how the adult reader saw the process of “getting there” as part of her personal development, and many studies in literacy would fail to give detailed attention to the reader’s preferences and decision-making. However, Labrie underscored the need to ground both aspects of this dynamic firmly in readers’ social realities as described in their own words.

Along related lines, my work on Chinese popular fiction audiences explored the notion of reading aesthetics as part of an individual's living cultural repertoire (Kozar 1998). Although most of the expatriate Chinese readers who participated in my study were highly educated, many used popular fiction — and particularly martial arts fiction — to gain or rediscover a deeper appreciation of the richness of descriptive vocabulary in their first language. Despite their immediate focus on widely different audiences and outcomes, my past and present studies are related by an underlying concern with the concepts of storytelling as a basic form of life articulation, and with reading as essential to the achievement and maintenance of cultural literacy and social connection for the individual.

This article focuses on a museum based literacy project that took place in the fall of 1999 in Windsor, Hants County, Nova Scotia with a group of four adult women participants. The Nova Scotia pilot project was funded as part of a national "Valuing Literacy in Canada" SSHRC Strategic Research Grant administered by the Canadian Museums Association. Specifically, this discussion is concerned with a description of the interaction between the project settings and the learners, the importance of the contexts of use to an appreciation of literacy, and an understanding of gender, class, and value. Value is understood here as "weighted choice" or "attention" applied to a situation that the individual perceives as desirable.

As a kind of direct contrast to the notion of value, I explore nonparticipation as a source of ethnographic data and as a way of understanding motivation from the perspective of field research. Also, I apply Renwick's idea of commonplaces as signifiers from his study of English folk poetry (1980) to an analysis of what the women in the project spoke and wrote about as significant to them about the objects they chose to study. Finally, I describe preliminary findings with two other field sites that extend this research as part of my ongoing postdoctoral work, which is supported by the aforementioned SSHRC funding stream.

Before describing the group and the museum that served as the principal setting for study, I would like to discuss my position as the researcher and coordinator in this project. In this dual capacity, I often felt a sense of "If I build it, will they come?" On the one hand, in the strictest sense an ethnographer observes and describes culture. She does

not deliberately seek to change it or introduce modifications into the environment, even though the introduction of the ethnographic presence within the culture, or indeed the act of observation itself inevitably alters the context being studied. On the other hand, a project coordinator's objective may be to set up a program, or put a set of learning possibilities in place precisely with the intention to observe the outcomes of such modifications on a target audience. As this pilot project went on however, I realized that the two opposing facets of my role in this research were reconciled by the fact that I was a folklorist by training. Although natural contexts are the most desirable for the collection of field data, sometimes an induced or artificial context is the only way to explore a particular tradition and its meaning for those who practice it (Goldstein 1964; Ives 1974: 56-7).

Background: What Was Built, Where, and Who Came

"I was afraid no one would show up." Patricia Helliwell, the literacy coordinator involved in this project, used these words to describe her relief that they did not reflect the reality of our situation on that first day at Shand House in early September 1999. Certainly, the possibility that no one will come is a factor in almost any kind of public program development. However, we had to acknowledge that non-attendance was something we could face at any point in the program. The distances involved in travel for most of the women who participated, as well as the way in which they might come to prioritize a literacy program that was basically an extra, were potentially significant influences. As I will discuss in a later section, non-participation as an ethnographic response can actually become a useful way of conceptualizing an individual's interpretation of the demands of the research situation relative to her cultural parameters around sharing knowledge and traditions. In the end, or rather, at that particular beginning, five people came, four stayed, and three participants "graduated" and celebrated their finished work.

Although I am not able to provide a complete ethnographic context of the Windsor and West Hants County areas within the constraints of this article, I would like to mention a few salient points about the area and Shand House Museum that bear directly on this project. Geographically, Windsor is located approximately one hour's drive northwest of Halifax. Historically, Windsor was a thriving centre whose industries included wooden shipbuilding and gypsum mining. In the last century, it was also a recreational destination for residents of Halifax.

Place is a deeply rooted aspect of cultural identity and personal connection, a realization that I came to only after I moved away from the large urban centre where I grew up. I have often found that people in rural Maritime communities claim a unique identity and sense of place that makes each area distinctive, even though the actual distances between communities may be relatively small. Generally, the women who participated in this project were highly focused on their communities and going “into town” (which in this case could be either Windsor or Kentville, depending on where they lived) was an occasional necessity, but not a frequent occurrence. Going to “the city” (Halifax) was a rare event, and one that some of the women looked on with a mixture of some trepidation and distaste. Because of Windsor’s past industrial and social history, and because of the different patterns of settlement, I found it quite common for people who lived outside the town to mark their home communities as distinct from Windsor. Today, Windsor is a small rural town with few industries; however, its once prosperous economy is evident from its built heritage, as a number of late Victorian residences — many showing ornate Carpenter Gothic or gingerbread external decoration — remain. Perhaps one of the best examples of this is the Shand House Museum, given to the Nova Scotia Museum upon the death of Gwendolyn Shand in the early 1980s.

Because they all came from elsewhere, the “Shand House research team” — as they preferred to be called — were ethnographers in the sense that they were coming into a community where they were essentially strangers. I will return to the construction of class later in the discussion; however, a key facet of the women’s approach to this learning should be noted here. Certainly, the women were entering a research setting that was new to them as none of them had ever visited Shand House before, and many of the objects and the lifestyle portrayed in the house were outside the women’s immediate experience. However, they all managed to “read the museum” and inscribe their impressions through talk and writing in ways that were meaningful for them. From the beginning, and for the duration of the research period, they claimed the learning spaces and time (Friday mornings) as their own. What follows is a brief “guided tour” of the Museum, which provides a basic frame of reference for the first-time visitor, and is similar in scope and content to what our project team experienced on that first morning.

The house was built in 1890, designed and commissioned to the specifications of Clifford Shand as a wedding gift to his bride Henri.

Since its restoration to the original color scheme in 1999, Shand House is perhaps one of the best-preserved examples of original gingerbread architecture in the area. Family members continuously occupied Shand House until the death of Clifford and Henri's daughter Gwendolyn, and its displays reflect 100 years of the continuous material history of a family home. The interpreters focus their presentations on the family members, particularly Henri. A number of her paintings adorn the walls in the front rooms. The Shands had two children, Gwendolyn and Errol, neither of whom married. Gwendolyn Shand attended Acadia Seminary in Wolfville in 1910, and went on to study at McGill University and pursue a career in social work. After she retired, she returned to Windsor to live in the house where she was born for the rest of her life.

Since much of the interpretation revolves around Mrs. Shand, the layout of the house reflects her tastes and concerns. The lower floor, with its tiled storm porch, grand staircase, divided formal — and somewhat less formal — receiving parlors, and imposing oak paneled dining room brings the visitor an impressive glimpse of late Victorian life as experienced by a prosperous merchant family. Upstairs, the main bedroom is decorated as it would have been for Clifford and Henri, and includes a carriage and some items from the children's early years. Another bedroom is Gwendolyn's room, and includes such features as the graduation dress that she wore when she completed her studies at Acadia. A smaller room is decorated simply, and was apparently used by Errol Shand during visits to his family as an adult. After training as an engineer, Errol moved to New York and spent most of his life there. Leading up the back stairs from the kitchen, there is also the maid's bedroom, and a discretely placed laundry cupboard and linen press fitted into a recess in the wall off the back upstairs landing. A cyclist of some note, Clifford Shand's experiences are documented in a number of portraits located downstairs and in the viewing tower, and there is a replica of his bicycle that is displayed on the porch while the museum is open. The nursery, which features a beautiful stained-glass window, is now used as a staff room.

The participants, Patricia and I met in this room on Friday mornings for our group discussions. Comparative work and follow-up research conducted after Shand House closed for the season in mid-October took place at the nearby West Hants Historical Society Museum, a community facility dedicated to documenting and preserving information about the everyday life of Windsor and surrounding area

through artifacts and photographs. The West Hants Historical Society Museum also has an extensive genealogical library, which the women enjoyed discovering.

Clifford Shand provided the specifications for the house, and wanted to present his bride with a thoroughly modern home of the period. Perhaps one of the most striking and eccentric features of the house is the hearth in the foyer. Faced with the dilemma that a home should be fitted with a receiving hearth for the comfort of waiting guests, but unable to install a working fireplace in the narrow hall, Clifford opted for a decorative hearth. Its "fire" is composed of pieces of brightly colored stained glass lit from below by electric light. The positioning of the reception hall also permitted Mrs. Shand to indicate whether she wanted to receive the waiting guests or not without actually coming downstairs, as she could see them from the main upstairs landing and signal her decision to the maid. Much of the furniture for the house was mass-produced, and came from the Windsor Furniture Factory, a once thriving business part owned by Clifford's father.

On the first day, five women attended the orientation session. Only one was from Windsor, and although she signed the release form, she never attended again. As mentioned earlier, all of the other women lived outside Windsor. Two women, who will be referred to in this paper as "Jennifer" and "Maureen," came together from Patricia's home community, which is at least a thirty-minute drive from Windsor. Another woman, "Sarah," came from a nearby community, but did not drive. Early on, Sarah expressed concern that she would not be able to participate because her husband may not be willing to drive her each week. To solve this potential problem, Patricia arranged to bring her to and from the museum for each meeting. "Lori" also drove a considerable distance every Friday morning for the eight weeks of the research period. There is no public transportation from the women's home communities to Windsor.

All of the women were mothers of two or three school-aged children. Maureen and Jennifer were single parents. Sarah and Lori were married. However, over the weeks we met at the museum, Lori's husband was incarcerated for abusive behaviour toward her. He was released on the last day of our work together, and although Lori attended on that day, she did not complete the pilot project. Jennifer, Maureen, and Sarah had achieved their grade 12 diplomas within that year. Lori was very

excited because she was entering the equivalent of grade 9 in her upgrading program and had made significant progress since the start of her studies. She hoped to graduate with her grade 12 within the next 18 months.

All of the women who participated in our pilot project had advanced literacy skills and saw the project as an opportunity to refine and develop their skills through additional practice in a new environment. They were all parents, and I sense that all had experienced unsatisfactory relationships over which they felt little personal power. Also, all had experience with the provincial social assistance system, which may have included periodic participation in government-sponsored education and training programs. As I will discuss later, these experiences may have influenced some of the choices they made in their research.

Values, Contexts, and Responses: What We Did, and Where We Went

In her study of literacy among women in a rural Nova Scotia community, Horsman asserts that literacy/illiteracy is a form of discourse which, as a concept, “allows us to speak of the importance of language as a way of framing reality and shaping how we see ourselves and the world.” In claiming a space to speak as subjects, we are at the same time subjected to the rules and dominant practices of the particular discourses with which we identify and by which we are identified by others (1990: 23).

More specifically, a participant in an upgrading course may actively resist the labels and implications attached to her efforts. However, those facets of the discourse are still there — that by joining a literacy program, she is somehow less literate than the vast majority of people who are not present in the class. She may strive to see herself as an active subject seeking to transform or enrich some aspect of her life through education. At the same time, she may be passively subjected to assumptions about literacy learning that do not take into account such factors as opportunity, gendered cultural expectations, and the day-to-day prioritizing of personal energies — such as raising small children on a limited income without the support of a partner. Any combination of these factors may have prevented her from previously taking up or completing her formal educational training. If literacy, or the level of one’s literacy, is a socially constructed discourse that frames reality and puts parameters around directions, choices, and options, then the

decision to enlarge that discourse, however much educational upgrading may be expected or valued by society, is a subversive and courageous act that challenges the ways in which the person who makes that choice formerly read the world, and was read by it.

From a folkloric perspective, literacy as discourse can also be explored as an expression of traditional or everyday culture and worldview. As Greenhill and Tye point out, although many women's narrative performances occur in conversational contexts that serve to connect women to their families and communities through talk, to confine their expression to a private or domestic sphere is clearly an oversimplification (1993: 324, 328). In my research, I have found that although older men and women often share an interest in local history, younger women are often more likely to conduct genealogical research in order to identify and celebrate their families. While some men may undertake such research for personal reasons, others create a public expression of their findings, such as a book. As a result of their dedicated efforts, published local authors may become known in the community as "good at history." By contrast, women seem more likely to explore their family histories in order to learn more about where they came from so that they can pass this knowledge on to their children and friends. In her analysis of the work of Springhill ethnographer Jean Heffernan, Tye points to some of the strategies Heffernan used to speak out in a world of overwhelmingly masculine opinion (1997: 54-55.) Likewise, I think that it is important to remember that women are very often the unsung keepers of community history and folklore, and that their view of history frequently reflects and emphasizes family relationships and women's perspectives and experiences.

The women who participated in the Shand House Museum project told the stories of their research in particular ways that were, I believe, intimately connected to their experiences as women actively participating in a process of life education not only through their literacy activities, but also through their daily interactions. As I mentioned earlier, Jennifer and Maureen were best friends, and they chose to work together on the gingerbread architecture of Shand House. Because much of the furniture inside Shand House was mass-produced, and there are not many examples of elaborate fretwork internally, they had to concentrate on the outside of the house. This meant that they moved deliberately into the public sphere in their explorations on many levels. Most immediately, they had to be outside observing gingerbread around

Shand House and comparing it to other examples in Windsor and other communities so that they could comprehend the range and variation of styles and placement. In order to get an idea of how gingerbread was produced, they visited the Sutherland Steam Mill Museum in Denmark, NS. Although woodworking is often perceived as a male occupation, Jennifer expressed a great interest and considerable skill in carpentry. Much of her report focuses on their visit to the Sutherland Steam Mill and a discussion of the tools that were used at the time to create gingerbread, what it was made of, as well as the degrees of creative freedom that governed its design and production:

If you were to walk into a building supply store today what would you look for. If you wanted to fancy up the outside of your house would it be premade trim with their design and only maybe a handful of selections. Now picture back in the 1900s, if you were to walk into Sutherland Steam Mill they would ask if you have your own design in mind if so you could get the piece cut for you or if you did not have a design you could choose from one that was there from another person that the mill has a pattern for. So next time you walk into a building supply store try to imagine how it was back then and how it is for us today.

Interestingly, Jennifer points to a process of production that is actually very domestic in its orientation. The ability to design one's own pattern, or borrow others, is reminiscent of the ways in which women create and acquire items of traditional culture, such as craft patterns, recipes and songs. Jennifer's interest in the traditionally male world of power tools and carpentry started while she was married, but was suppressed by her ex-husband's reactions. Although she was a keen observer of his work, she said her ex-husband used to yell at her, and prohibited her from using his woodworking equipment. Ultimately, she said: "I threw him out, and kept the tools!"

Similarly, Maureen connects several aspects of a more or less "frivolous" Victorian domestic world of meals, fashion, and visiting in her report, which centres on identifying designs and how they could be used. She elaborates on a comparison with lingerie from a personal conversation, a reference to a theme in her readings (Robertson 1990), and alludes to a comment made by Lori that, in her opinion, a Victorian Christmas menu was "eighty percent 'extras'":

In Victorian times extras were an important part of life, whether you look at food, clothing, or wood. The "gingerbread" on a house is the

final touch to the structure. Like ribbons, bows, and lace added to lingerie, this decorative trim is used in the front of the house. Where the public eye can see is where gingerbread is concentrated. This is similar inside the home where the visitor is received.

Sarah's chosen topic, cycling at the turn of the century, was intriguing for a number of reasons. Her topic was connected to Shand House through Clifford Shand, who was an accomplished cyclist. However, she also moved out of the domestic parameters of the house to explore a pastime that was essentially a male domain. The main emphasis of her report presents the public and private face of cycling for men and women as a sport and social pastime. She gives an account of the fashions worn by women in their secret efforts to master a new masculine sport without looking absurd. She also notes that men took care to present a sporting appearance — and made sure that they did not perform sudden and uncontrolled dismounts in public view:

Men learned to ride in buildings, until they managed to keep their balance on them. After they had managed this, they rode out in public.

Women would ride in private until 1899. The same year musical rides were invented. They learned "figure threading", "reverse circles", "throwing white balls while riding", and "square dancing" ("Lancers" and "Caledonian"). They performed at Princess Maud and Prince Carl's wedding. Women who could not skate rode their bikes on ice by having McCready ice picks attached to their bicycle tires. They rode while their man skated beside them.

Different costumes were worn. Men wore knickerbockers. Women wore ankle-length skirts with petticoats at first. Then leg of mutton sleeves, hourglass waists, and enveloping skirts were worn. Years later divided skirts with tunic tops were worn.

Canadian women didn't like wearing bloomers and pants suits because people made fun of them. They started wearing knickerbockers.

Most park riders were women wearing leg of mutton sleeves, hourglass waists and enveloping skirts. Their bicycles were multicolored: pink with white lines, lemon with green lines, anything but black. Some were even painted the same color as the ladies dresses, and some male riders had their machines painted in their regimental colors.

As can be seen in the above excerpt, Sarah used the same phrase to describe the women's clothing twice. Although for a literacy learner this could represent a strategy designed to reduce the total number of ideas that the writer has to put in her own words, the repetition could

also signify something else. In conversations about her research, Sarah was very taken with the women's clothing, and how attire adapted to feminine styles allowed women to participate in a sport that was clearly not designed with them in mind. Sarah seemed fascinated with the idea that people learned to ride in buildings so that others would not see their unpracticed techniques.

Clearly, the women's riding costumes were highly significant for Sarah, and the words used to name the fashions themselves served an important purpose by equipping her with the means to describe many of the social aspects of women's entry into this new sport. In his analysis of English folk poetry, Renwick argues that commonplaces, the repetitive phrases and imagery found in local poetry and song, cannot be understood simply as devices to compensate for poor memory or lack of imagination. Rather, he suggests that commonplaces appear in performed texts as collective signifiers that have many levels of symbolic meaning beyond the things they actually refer to. He observes:

However, if these commonplaces also have symbolic qualities, then a further explanation can be added to the somewhat mechanistic ones we customarily offer, since symbols are among the most value-laden, culturally important, expressively marked, and conceptually abstract representations of a culture's knowledge and ethic (1980: 37).

Since the very nature of literacy is always contextual and often collective (Fagan 1998: 55-8), and since women's expressive culture is most often performed in conversation, I suggest that, in addition to any cultural commonplaces that may be part of the women's worldviews, each individual learner may choose to designate points of symbolic value and significance in her efforts to map the domain of her new learning. Therefore, perhaps names of the fashions women wore while riding provided Sarah with a kind of commonplace upon which she could firmly base and centre her learning.

Similarly, for Maureen, who was quite artistic and a good photographer, the central organizing concept seems to have been the pervasive evidence of excess throughout Victorian design. In Lori's case, the dual concepts of "Christmas" and excess or "extras" provided her with a conceptual landscape that encouraged exploration, discovery, and play. For Jennifer, I think the commonplaces were somewhat paradoxically double-sided. Her central themes focused on gingerbread as a consumer item subject to design and selection by the individual,

and the process of construction. From her writing, it is apparent that the steps involved in making of gingerbread trim seemed at odds with the expectation that the customer would be encouraged to specify a design *at all*, since using the large steam powered machines to turn out unique pieces was so time- and labour-intensive. As Jennifer wrote in her report:

Machines in the nineteenth century were steamed powered and the machines we used today to make trim are electric powered. The machines at the Sutherland Steam Mill were large and not movable, you would move the wood through the machines to cut out your designs, but today the tools are smaller and more compact so you can move the tools around the wood to cut out your piece.

My conclusion is that when I look at a house with the fancy trim I can say I know that this design is called "Gingerbread trim." Also I understand how the gingerbread trim was made and how time consuming it was to produce.

Returning for a moment to Sarah's topic, I knew she did not drive and that as a child, she was, by her own admission, something of a tomboy who once broke a cherished doll belonging to her mother. I wondered if she enjoyed, or would enjoy, cycling, and whether that is what attracted her to the topic in the first place. I was somewhat surprised to find out that Sarah did not like cycling at all, at least not as a leisure activity. She tried to learn when she was younger, but fell and then abandoned any further attempts. Upon reflection, I was reminded of other ethnographic moments where I encountered individuals who did not necessarily like all — or any — aspects of the traditional culture they performed or understood as tradition bearers. As Smith observes, desire or value function on personal as well as social levels, and desirable, compelling, or significant traditions, experiences or other stimuli need not be pleasant (1975: 72).

For Sarah, cycling was not pleasant, but studying how Victorian women mastered the new sport clearly was. The clothing that women cyclists wore made something that was slightly dangerous and extremely unladylike not only possible, but also popular. The riding costumes widened a woman's sphere of social activities, and allowed her to master a rather subversive skill. It is possible that, even though Sarah did not enjoy cycling herself, she found pleasure in these Victorian expressions of female resistance.

Lori's choices and learning processes are more difficult to specify because she did not complete the pilot project. She chose "Victorian Christmas" as her topic on the first day that we met. I sensed that this could be difficult to study in the context of Shand House, because other than a box of glass ornaments in the attic, there was little material or written evidence of how Christmas at Shand House was celebrated. To compensate for this, Lori was very interested in looking at any books on the subject, and she was also quite adept at Internet searches. Lori described herself as an avid genealogist. She mentioned that one of her hobbies was the identification and collection of Victorian dolls, and she enjoyed almost every aspect of material culture and decoration from the Victorian era. At our second meeting, we went to the West Hants Historical Society Museum, and Lori was able to identify and date many of the dolls in that collection, and detail some of their defining features.

From the beginning, Lori appeared enthusiastic and cheerful, and she attended every Friday, despite having to deal frequently with illness and significant family stresses. I find it interesting that her topic took her outside the house altogether on her research journey. Looking at Lori's participation against the background of the bits and pieces I was learning about her life, I was poignantly aware that, as the mother of three special needs children on social assistance, Christmases in her home were probably anything but excessive. I thought that perhaps Lori's attraction to "old-fashioned" Christmas and its layered artifacts and memories — a resilient mythology for many people even when the artifacts are lacking and the memories are painful — might be based in a desire to possess something by understanding as much of it as possible. People work memories and objects together in their lives in ways that allow them to actively create traditions, respond to change by weaving narratives around objects and endowing them with new meanings, and by using things to give new substance to events and moments of loss in their lives. Objects and the stories we tell about them allow us literally to "re-member" our lives and so find a measure of healing (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1989).

It became clear that the main challenge for Lori was learning how to narrow topics and focus her efforts around a particular set of research questions. In a questionnaire given to the participants on our last official field day, October 15th, Lori described herself as having "a hunger" for research, and a love of "digging" and discovery. At one point during

field research, she became fascinated with finding out all of the possible “Christmas firsts” that she could — the first card, the earliest manifestations of St. Nicholas, the first Christmas tree, and so on. She alluded to this challenge to her learning in the questionnaire. When asked what she expected to find out about her topic, she wrote:

I was hoping to find as much as possible on Victorian Christmas, but I'd never realized that I was going to find everything and more, every topic leads to something else.

A good illustration of Lori's orientation to learning came during our visit in mid-September to the West Hants Historical Society Museum. We were shown a quilt that was lying over a rocking chair. The quilt was made up of small hexagonal pieces, stitched together by a young woman whose fiancé had been lost at sea. His love letters had been used as foundation padding. Fragments of his writings were visible where the stitching was worn. Lori stated emphatically: “There's a story in this quilt!” Lori commented on the quality of the stitching, and observed that much of it seemed careless; large uneven stitches that fell far short of any domestic ideal. “Perhaps she was young,” I offered. Lori replied: “Maybe she was upset, and she put this together after he died.” I was impressed by her connection of the object to its maker's possible emotional state. Looking back, that quilt was a kind of metaphor for Lori, her learning style, and her participation in the group. She liked to get into the middle of something, see how it was put together, and try to tell the story of why it was like that — as she saw it. And, like the quilt, I perceived that her life was made of many pieces, some fraying where they touched, the overall pattern hiding from immediate view a complex story exposed in fragments, but one that I suspect few will ever fully read.

In *Ways with Words*, Heath describes the ethnographic learning process within the communities she studied as bi-directional knowledge translation and transfer between familiar and unfamiliar domains (1983: 324). Essentially, I think this process also holds for adult learners, but the familiar/unfamiliar dynamic must be grounded in a discourse that considers context and value as well. For the children Heath studied, part of their motivation would likely have come from the novel conditions her presence introduced into the class routine — a point she does not appear to discuss in detail. Their motivation to learn would also have been reinforced by the realization that their science unit would eventually translate into the familiar marker of a grade.

For the women in our study, the choice to participate in the pilot project held no such externally marked value. They would not receive a grade, and although we did discuss certificates and a graduation, that observance could only be a group event imbued with whatever significance they personally attached to it. We would not be helping them get a job, become better mothers, or improve relationships with their caseworkers by enrolling them in a provincially recognized course of upgrading. The decision to join the program and commit to our Friday meetings — and make whatever adjustments to their lives such attendance entailed — had to have some independent intrinsic value for them. I think one clearly value added component of the project was that our meetings became “their time” each week, and provided an opportunity to learn and talk together.

In their ethnographic study of literacy in Lancaster, Barton and Hamilton describe literacy as patterned by such factors as gender, history, social institutions, and the various larger cultural practices in which they are situated. Furthermore, literacy reflects a dynamic set of practices that is subject to change in value and currency as individuals are continually influenced by shifting contexts of interaction, and ongoing informal learning (Barton and Hamilton 1998: 6-7). In short: “Literacy is best understood as a set of social practices; these can be inferred from events which are mediated by written texts” (7-8). Clearly, the parameters or emphases of formal education do not limit the scope of literacy. For example, Barton and Hamilton discuss learners who taught themselves about such things as betting practices, and then shared their knowledge as mentors with other interested family members, through self-directed research (39-41). However, an adult’s interests and personal networks play an important role in setting the stage for change and growth as well as moments of apparent stasis in lifelong learning. When a person’s social networks and interests experience periods of transition, his or her patterns of learning may be significantly influenced.

Similarly, Fagan asserts that describing types or “genres” of literacy is less useful than understanding literacy in terms of a constellation of collective cultural processes that cannot be understood without careful attention to the contexts of their use (1998: 39-42). Furthermore, it is important to examine what people value in their lives. Value is a key to understanding a learner’s motivation. If literacy is not seen to have a direct impact on a person’s daily life, it will not be valued, or the rhetoric of self-betterment that frequently surrounds it will be questioned.

Maureen, who graduated more than a year ago, put her situation in these terms: she values her grade 12 because she went out and did it, and she knows that it may help her get a job someday. However, there are few jobs where she lives, and relocating with a young family is difficult. Additionally, she would need to make at least ten dollars an hour in order to pay a sitter in the rural community where she now resides. If she moves to the city, her living expenses will be higher, so she will have to earn even more. Maureen recognizes that although her literacy has transformed her life on a personal level, she cannot make the kinds of changes in her immediate world necessary to transform her family's lives at this time, and so those possibilities are not greatly valued at the moment.

Maureen's perspective is not new, and her problems are not unique. A 1992 report by the National Anti-Poverty Organization establishes its opening arguments with the following assertion:

Government policies designed to "solve" illiteracy will have very limited effect unless they are linked to a serious attack on poverty. Moreover, because of systemic inequality, the acquisition of literacy skills alone does not automatically lead to a better standard of living. Teaching people to read and write will not create jobs that do not exist, make it easier to survive on the minimum wage or get rid of discrimination against disadvantaged groups in our society (1992: 1).

Certainly, some of the factors that allowed us to pilot this project at all included funds in the project budget for participants' mileage costs, and a meeting room that was available on a school day morning, thanks to the staff at Shand House and the volunteers at West Hants. Without these supports, our project would have suffered from constraints around transportation and childcare, and may have ultimately prevented the women's participation.

Audrey Thomas' 1990 study of non-participation and dropout rates in British Columbia Adult Basic Education programs provides a compelling and compassionate look at individuals who "fail to succeed" at literacy upgrading. She cites the mutual interactions of a number of intrinsic and extrinsic factors that impact negatively on the learning context. These include, but are not limited to, learners' fears and past experiences, day-to-day domestic commitments and other constraints, lack of programs, or lack of flexibility in existing programs, and inadequate personal supports (83-87). She also points out that learners'

sporadic but recurrent participation patterns needed consideration (vii-viii). Understandably, irregular attendance poses a significant challenge to program design and, in many instances, continued and stable funding. However, students with intermittent attendance records who could be encouraged to see themselves as “drop-ins” in a program that was flexible enough to work within their participatory comfort levels — even for a trial period — might feel encouraged to attend more regularly and for longer periods of time.

Also, a “lack” motivation can be understood in terms of what Cothran calls “non-participation in tradition.” She makes the point that what people *do not say* or *say they do not do* in their performance of traditions — what they refuse or reject as participants — is as methodologically significant as the performances they acknowledge (1979: 446). Moreover, Fagan notes that individuals’ margins for learning can be understood as the margin of difference between the load of stressors on their lives, and the power learners perceive they are able to bring to bear on the demands of their lives to minimize those stressors (1998: 212-13). As such, Lori’s decision to withdraw her participation may be understood as an active and potentially positive choice for her in the larger picture of her life situation at the time. Perhaps the pilot project was the only aspect of her life to which she could say: “Enough!” and for that reason her participation and non-participation alike should be valued and respected as appropriate responses to the project.

Class issues require some further explication at this point. Although class did not play an obvious part in the women’s responses to Shand House or its artifacts, I think class concerns underscored some of the choices they made about what they wanted to study. Certainly, they explored the house enthusiastically, and were all struck by the different formal and informal conversations and stories that were expressed in the domestic environment as a whole, and that spilled out into the placement and styles of trim on the outside. The most decorative rooms were the most public, and yet perhaps the most compelling space for many of them was the kitchen leading to the “maid’s back stairs”, because there seemed to be almost a second house within Shand House, a smaller, plainer, and extremely private one. Likewise, they noticed that the exuberant flourishes of gingerbread that announced themselves so forcefully to visitors at the front of the house softened to a whisper at the sides, and fell silent around the back. “No one really looks or pays

attention there,” Jennifer and Maureen concluded. They decided that the lack of trim around the back of the house suggested that a much smaller and more familiar audience would use the rear of the house, and therefore an elaborate external presentation was not necessary.

Class was not a concern within and around the house, but it may have influenced the women’s decisions not to study the Shand family in any depth, and particularly not to study either Henri or Gwendolyn Shand — a somewhat surprising outcome given the emphasis of interpretation. From early in the project, the women’s choices around topics showed a strong tendency to move beyond the borders of Shand House as a learning context. Perhaps because this project was an extra to the extent that it was not linked to any other officially sponsored course or program, the women felt free to move beyond the House as the frame and historical family setting that constituted both their focus and their classroom. They seemed drawn to pose and explore questions that were not addressed immediately by what they saw. In acknowledging Shand House as their “home base,” they were also acutely aware that, as visitors with a special purpose from the outset, they were going to be intimately engaged with aspects of the museum on a weekly basis, and therefore they were like strangers on an extended visit. The fact that they were women researchers regularly accessing the domestic spaces of other women who could not tell their own stories may also have influenced them — consciously or unconsciously — to set parameters around the kinds of questions they felt were appropriate to ask.

Conclusion: Reflections, Extensions and Outcomes

From the women’s comments and questionnaire responses, I think that the pilot project was generally successful. However, I would like to take a moment to reflect on changes I have implemented in the project sites that form the focus of my postdoctoral research. Of the participants in the pilot, I would say that Maureen and Jennifer gained the most from the experience because they worked together, and their friendship was a source of mutual support, something that Sarah lacked. Working together on a collaborative project, they also had to keep each other focused, which was a problem for Lori.

The pilot project, though modest, yielded many valuable insights and suggested possibilities for future application. After commencing my postdoctoral research in October 2000, I coordinated two field

sites from January-March 2001, one in Sydney, Cape Breton and the other in Bridgewater on the South Shore. I developed a series of initial participant information sessions with activities that are linked to learning outcomes in the recently revised provincial curriculum, such as the demonstration of active listening skills, the ability to ask questions and present information to a group, and interviewing. The two site projects took place over six to eight weeks, for one half day per class group per week.

In the first session, students were introduced to the study of objects through the analysis of a common cultural object, such as disposable coffee cup. In the second session, students learned about the analysis of photographs. In this session, they were provided with single-use cameras and instructed to take photographs of favorite places, people, and objects. Also, they were shown archival photographs within the museum collection and given a series of questions to ask about the photographs. They were also encouraged to generate new questions about the photographs they were given, or about others from the collection.

In the week following, students were introduced to interviewing. At this session, participants returned the cameras for processing. The next two to three weeks gave students supported but self-directed research time to study their topics. At this time, students received their developed pictures. They looked at them for a few minutes, and then traded them with another group of students who arranged the pictures in the form of a collection. They were invited to ask questions of the students who took the pictures and rearrange the collection as necessary and discuss the pictures. At this time, participants learned about concepts such as provenance in order to give them some idea of the issues that go into developing an exhibit from a museum collection when the curator only has limited access to information.

The two sites reflect contrasting conditions in terms of setting, student composition and skill level, and outcomes. In Bridgewater, I met with Level 3 students at the DesBrisay Museum in the morning and Level 1 and 2 students in the afternoon. There was only one male student in this project, and he was an enthusiastic participant throughout. Except for the first day, no teacher or tutor was present because some students opted not to participate, and therefore the instructor had to stay in the classroom with the remaining students. Although the DesBrisay Museum is severely short-staffed, the Director was extremely supportive, and

devoted a considerable amount of his limited time to helping the students. All of the students in the Bridgewater group demonstrated a generally positive attitude toward writing, regardless of level. Eighteen students originally signed the plain language release forms in the Bridgewater project; however, nearly half failed to attend. Others left the project after one or two sessions, and one completed a significant amount of work in the museum project, even though she eventually left her upgrading classes. She received a certificate of completion for the museum project at its conclusion. In total, seven students completed the DesBrisay project.

In Sydney, I worked with ten learners, one teacher, one tutor and the volunteer president of the local Whitney Pier Historical Society, who was also our museum contact. The Whitney Pier Museum is seasonal, and was closed during the research period. We met in one of the classrooms at the Learning Network. In the Sydney group, all of the learners associated with the network were from a Level 1 and 2 class, and six were male. Two of the four female students were not currently enrolled in an upgrading program, although one had strong writing skills and often worked independently in the class. Most of the students in Sydney, however, were extremely reticent about writing. Accordingly, after the project received some funds from a Human Resources Development program, the Learning Centre purchased some small tape recorders. Students recorded their responses, and I transcribed them for the following week. In this way, the students could create texts even if they felt that their writing skills were restrictive. Although the Windsor pilot only involved observation and note-taking on my part, at both later sites I documented sessions through the use of audio and video recordings, in addition to my own notes. Also, I made copies of any student writing, taped responses, interviews and photographs they took. All ten students completed the Sydney project.

The information sessions were a feature of both site projects. As might be expected, given the very different features of the two sites, the ways the students responded to and used the information were completely different across the two groups, particularly with regard to interviewing. In Sydney, several students opted to interview members of the local community following that orientation session. Overall, I think that most instructors of introductory folklore classes would concur that these were pretty good interviews. They developed questions, and the resulting transcripts show an awareness of how to use the technology,

how to ask thoughtful questions that solicit elaborated answers and how to listen actively. In Bridgewater, none of the students conducted interviews, although they wrote willingly and quite well. In light of the research by Labrie and others into the differences between alphabetical and oral worldviews, this result with literacy learners is striking, and merits further attention. I examine this relationship with particular emphasis on women learners in the Sydney project in another article (Kozar 2001).

In any project of this type, support from teachers and museum staff is crucial to the ultimate success of the students' learning experiences. Teachers provide ongoing support and encouragement for students who have entered a new learning environment that requires risk-taking and problem solving. Similarly, the museum reinforces the students' learning by exploring how the stories of their discoveries could be brought to the public. In the pilot project, although the Shand House interpreters were helpful and willing to share knowledge, they were not actively involved with the learners. There are a variety of possible reasons for this, all of which are beyond the scope of this discussion. As a result, part of the process of knowledge exchange could not occur. According to Matusov and Rogoff, learning

occurs as people change responsibilities for and membership in communities of practice and when they transform sociocultural tools that they use in the activity... the museum is not only a crossroad of different practices and communities; it also guides visitors in how to bridge different practices and communities (1995: 101-02).

Establishing contexts in which learners and museum staff and volunteers gain insight into different communities of practice suggested rich and worthwhile ethnographic learning opportunities that ultimately formed the basis of my postdoctoral work.

But, the museum's commitment to participation is important for another reason. Learners' efforts need to be celebrated in a tangible outcome that extends beyond the boundaries of the group relations. Although we had a graduation in the pilot project and the women who completed their research received certificates, we were unable to come up with a product that incorporated their work. As Csikszentmihalyi and Hermanson state in their discussion of learning in museums as "flow" experiences, intrinsically motivating learning situations that have the power to transform understanding in a lasting way have a mechanism

for unambiguous feedback as one of their essential components (1995: 70). An exhibit or publication serves such a purpose because it frames the learning process in a public way. If it is there as a goal from the beginning, its ultimate realization helps to define the boundaries and possibilities for the entire experience, and helps the project coordinators determine whether the learners' undertaking is realistic given the time, people, and other resources available.

Finally, I think it is important to remember that in a global economy, we must not lose sight of the local. In a wired world, we must not ignore the points of disconnection, and the disconnected. They are the frequent and the many, not the few and far between. Folklore, as part of adult learning — indeed, as a fundamental part of any formal and informal cultural education — illuminates the importance of the smaller patterns of daily existence within the larger ones. Also, when a learner understands that her knowledge about her world is a kind of expertise, she develops greater self-confidence, something that conventional education and training programs frequently fail to inspire. As Doucette observes, we need to

(...) incorporate economic and cultural knowledge into one description that will have validity and serve some useful purpose for the community... we must locate our commitment in the groups we study, not as *we* define their interests, but as *they* do, and pledge ourselves to the betterment of their lives, on their terms (1997: 24-25).

By creating communities of practice with local groups, folklorists can play a central role in strengthening the knowledge economies that matter most to the quality of community life in many parts of Canada.

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