

The Truth in Our Stories: Culturally Inclusive and Relevant School Library Learning Commons

By Anita Brooks Kirkland

Our truth is in the stories we tell. Nowhere is this better understood than in libraries. But what is our school library story as it relates to equity and cultural inclusion, and how relevant is that story to the needs of our students today? Every story is written from a point of view and truths can be elusive.

What is the role of the school library learning commons in keeping, sharing and creating the new story of Canada as a diverse, multicultural society and as a country that honours its relationship with its Indigenous peoples? What is the role of the school library learning commons in serving our multi-cultural society and in developing a welcoming and inclusive school culture?

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Canada and Australia: Our Shared Story

Canada and Australia share a story. Both countries were born out of British colonialism and both have grown into thriving and diverse multicultural societies. Canada has depended on immigration as a driver of economic and social growth. We understand ourselves as a country of immigrants and value diverse expressions of culture as part of the Canadian identity. One in five Canadians are foreign born, higher than any of the other Group of Seven (G7) countries and only surpassed by Australia, with 26.8 percent of the population being born outside the country. Patterns of immigration have shifted over time in Canada, from largely British and European of decades ago to an increased share from Africa, the Caribbean, and Central and South America today. (Statistics Canada, 2011). Canada has welcomed a large number of refugees from Syria and other countries troubled by war.

Increasingly Canadians are beginning to acknowledge the hard truths that bely our own self-image as a tolerant multicultural society, like the [internment of Japanese Canadians during World War II](#) (Canadian Encyclopedia) and the horrors of recent hate crimes like the [mass shooting at a Québec City mosque](#) (CBC News, 2018) in 2017. As Canadians collectively try to live up to our identity as a multicultural society, we deal with international uncertainty and the spill-over effect of living next door to Donald Trump's America, which has emboldened intolerance.

Canada and Australia also share a troubled history of relationships with our Indigenous peoples. Our colonial histories and continuing colonial practices as sovereign nations have had a disastrous impact on Indigenous peoples. Both countries have attempted to address this through a truth and reconciliation process. While Australians received the Bringing Them Home report in 1997, Canada's process has been more recent, culminating in the release of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) [Calls to Action](#) in 2015. Throughout years of testimony Canadians heard excruciating and devastating stories from residential school survivors. We were learning the truth about how these schools were tools of institutionalized oppression and abuse with the express mission of breaking Indigenous communities and culture on the road to assimilation.

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A National Reckoning: Canada 150

Soon after the release of the TRC Calls to Action, Canada started preparing for the 150th anniversary of confederation, Canada's break from British colonial rule. As the anniversary approached, Indigenous peoples and non-Indigenous allies began to point out that Canada's true history extended back through thousands of

years. From their perspective, Canada 150 was a hurtful celebration of the devastating impact of colonialism on Canada's Indigenous peoples.

Protests and controversy about Canada 150 opened up many Canadians' eyes. We were beginning to realize that the stories we've been told – or NOT told – have framed our understandings and our misunderstandings. Our responsibility as a nation was to learn the truth. Truth is the first step on the path to reconciliation. And as respected Indigenous journalist Jesse Wentle eloquently points out, we find truth through stories.

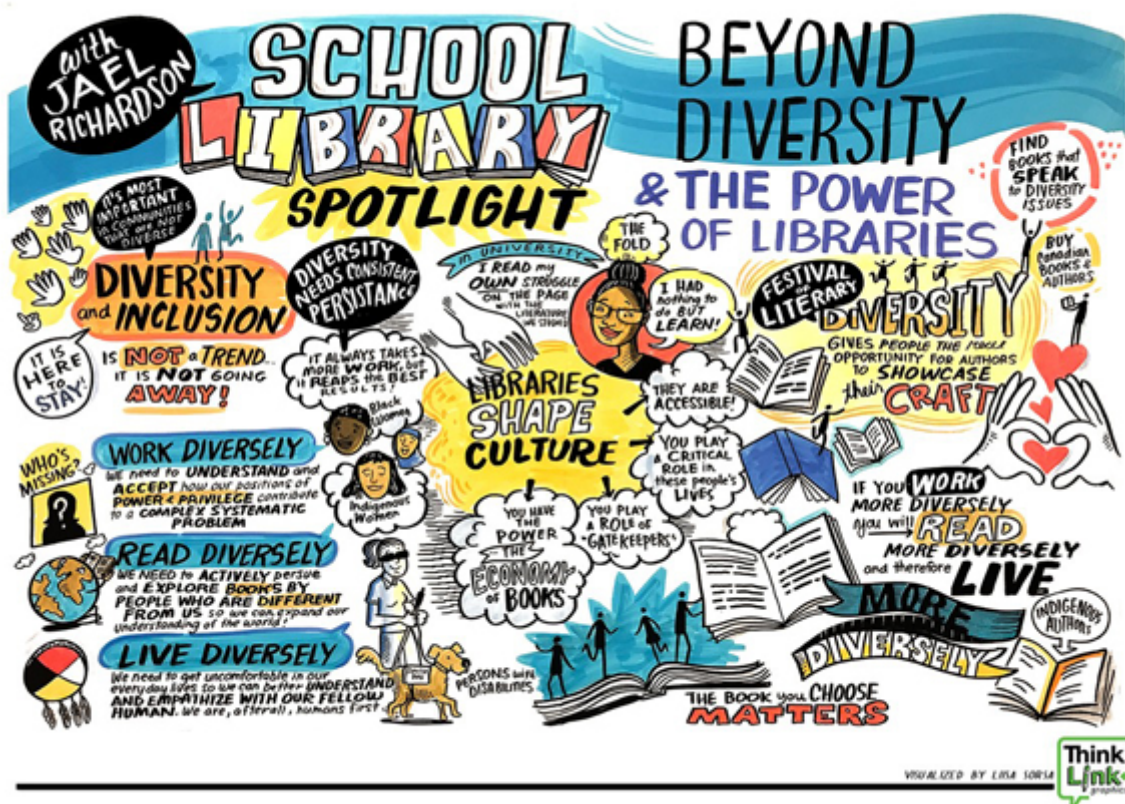
The interest is there, because after 150 years, we're finally trying to know each other. That's what Canada 150 is: the first time in its history, really, that Canada seems to be trying to know its Indigenous peoples. Truly know them. And what's one of the best ways to get to know someone? Through stories.

Of course, colonial states know that – that's why they obscure and steal stories, and create new ones, to reinforce the colonial state. (Wente, 2017)

Stories are told from and understood through our own cultural lens and facing up to our own inherent biases is a critical part of the journey. Dr. Dianne Oberg encourages us as educators to increase our cultural competence by facing this reality.

In much of our practice as educators, we avoid acknowledgement of race and culture—including our own race and culture--and sometimes we use terms such as 'diversity' and 'multiculturalism' without thinking deeply about our assumptions about the world that are encompassed within those terms. Our profession is predominately white, female, middle class, and well educated, but rarely do we engage in discussions, for example, about whiteness and white privilege, or about gender politics and power. Without recognizing and understanding our own culture, it is impossible to recognize and understand in any meaningful way the culture of others. Both are essential parts of cultural competence. (Oberg, 2017)

For many of us, myself included, this has been an intensely personal journey. Like so many fellow educators and librarians, I have sought out opportunities to educate myself. I am doing my best to take Canadian author Jael Richardson's advice to teacher-librarians to work diversely, read diversely and live diversely as we use the power of libraries to shape an inclusive future.



Keynote sketch by Liisa Sorsa, ThinkLink Graphics. Used with permission.

Canada's School Library Learning Commons: Moving Forward

Addressing the TRC Calls to Action has inspired educators and particularly teacher-librarians to seek out ways to leverage the potential of the library learning commons. The urgency to move forward with reconciliation parallels our deepening need to support the rich diversity of Canada's multicultural society.

Our national organisation [Canadian School Libraries](#) (CSL) has gathered several of these stories as part of the proceedings of its Treasure Mountain Canada (TMC) symposium in 2017 and in its journal.



Participants in the 2017 TMC Research Symposium and Think Tank. Image used with permission.

In October 2017 TMC partnered with the Manitoba School Library Association (MSLA) conference that focused on truth in our stories from an Indigenous perspective. TMC followed up by broadening that focus to cultural inclusion and responsiveness on all levels. With our shared history and similar perspectives, we hope that these examples of initiatives from Canadian schools will inspire our Australian colleagues as you deepen understanding about culturally relevant and responsive programs.

Connecting with Stories

Author Jael Richardson is dedicated to empowering the voice of diverse writers and values the role that teacher-librarians play.

School librarians are the key to students gaining access to diverse materials. They are the people who

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build diverse collections and have a personal connection with the students. When you recommend a book to a student, you don't know if you're giving them a mirror or a window when you give it over. The important thing is that you are there to provide it. (In Conversation with Jael Richardson)

Equity and Social Justice

Teacher-librarian Jennifer Brown reflects about the potential of library learning commons design and practices to address equity and social justice. She focuses on co-planning learning and teaching experiences, as well as the concept of an 'open maker forum' for students. ([Equity and Social Justice in the Library Learning Commons](#))

Infusing Indigenous Perspectives into Teaching and Learning

We call upon the federal, provincial, and territorial governments, in consultation and collaboration with Survivors, Aboriginal peoples, and educators, to: make age-appropriate curriculum on residential schools, Treaties, and Aboriginal peoples' historical and contemporary contributions to Canada a mandatory education requirement for Kindergarten to Grade Twelve students. Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action (2015)

Reconciliation through Collaboration

As Canadians, we all connect to sitting around a campfire telling stories, sharing ideas and being in each other's presence. This simple cross-cultural act of communication has been experienced throughout the ages. It is in this spirit that we are continuing to do our work in supporting culturally responsive education.

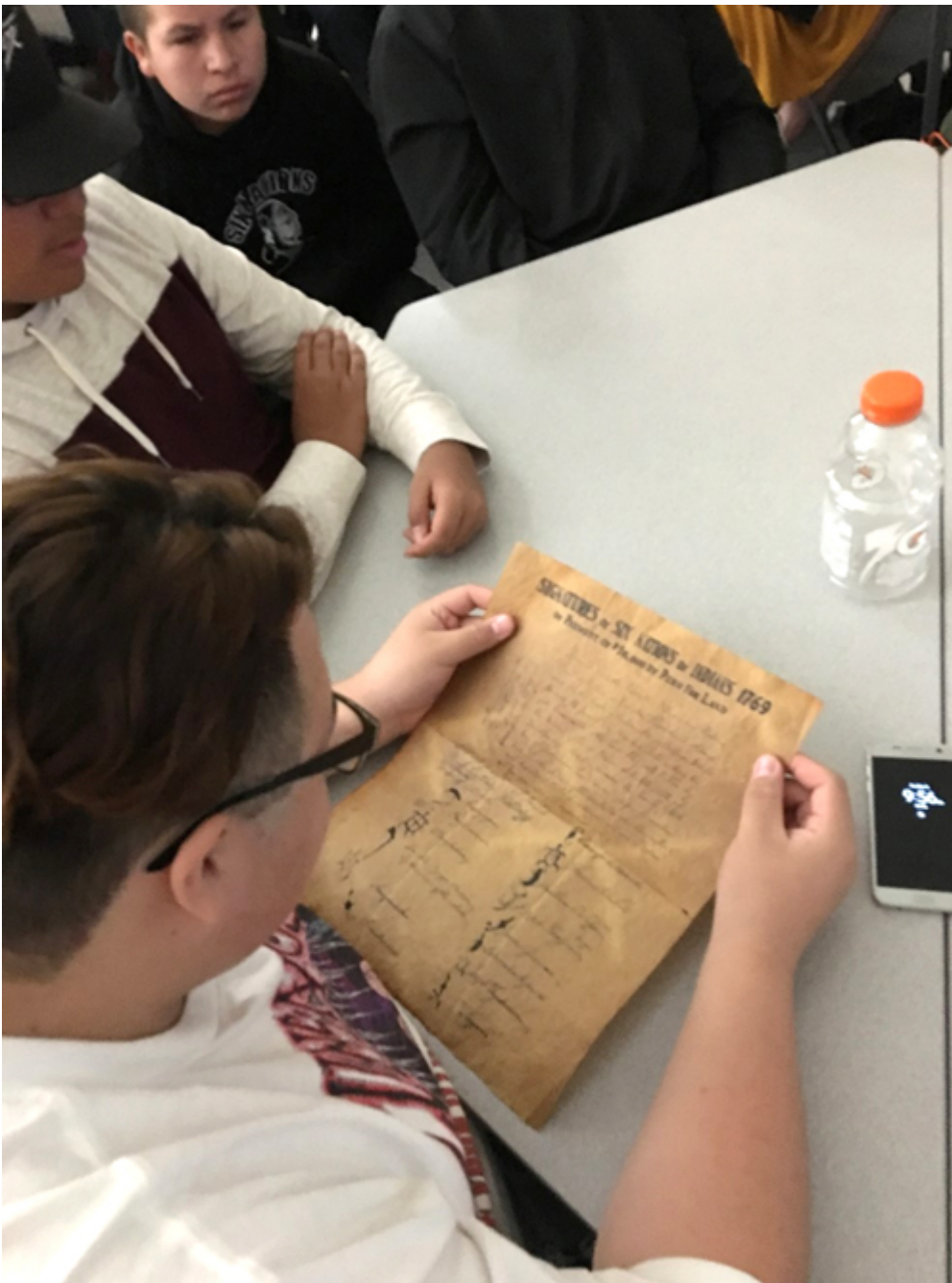
District learning commons vice-principal Monica Berra and district principal of aboriginal education Leona Prince, herself a member of the Lake Babine Nation and the Likh Tsa Mis Yu (Beaver) Clan, describe the process of creating a website resource for all educators in British Columbia dedicated to integrating Aboriginal ways of knowing and learning. ([Why Taking Your Seat at the Fire?](#))

Facilitating a School's Journey to Reconciliation

Recognising that the reconciliation process begins with learning the truth in our stories, Winnipeg teacher-librarian Jo-Anne Gibson describes her own personal learning journey and the multi-faceted leadership that she was able to take at her school.

If teachers continue to ignore Indigenous worldviews and knowledge in their classrooms, the stereotypes of Indigenous peoples, racism they encounter on a daily basis, and the inequality they experience in education, health care, employment opportunities and standard of living will continue. In a country that prides itself on being a just and fair society for all, this needs to stop. (Facilitating Reconciliation Through the Library Learning Commons)

Joel Krentz is the teacher-librarian at a culturally diverse school in Toronto. Through the many collaborative opportunities that his position affords to lead change, Joel coordinated a year-long schoolwide initiative to infuse Indigenous perspectives into teaching and learning. One of the most remarkable successes of the project was an increase in teachers' confidence as culturally competent educators. ([Infusing Indigenous Perspectives in our Teaching and Learning](#))



Students examine replicas of treaty documents at Brantford Collegiate Institute. Image used with permission.

Repairing Relationships and Moving Forward

Various Indigenous groups in what is now Canada established treaty relationships with the British crown and subsequently the Canadian government. Subsequent policies have dishonoured the mutual benefits represented by these treaties. Several schools held Living Library events as part of Ontario's Treaties Recognition Week, finding ways to recognize the wrongs of the past and taking steps to rebuild trust and respect. ([Ontario's School Libraries and Treaties Recognition Week](#).)

Canadian School Libraries: Dedicated to Increasing Capacity

The TMC symposium in 2017 was just the beginning of a journey to develop deeper understanding about cultural relevance and associated practices in the library learning commons. Early in the new school year Canadian School Libraries will be releasing web-based resources on the theme, framed by our national standards, [Leading Learning: Standards of Practice for School Library Learning Commons in Canada](#).

CSL is also a member association of the Canadian Federation of Library Associations / Fédération canadienne des associations de bibliothèques (CFLA-FCAB). CFLA-FCAB has been very aggressive in its response to the TRC Calls to Action, releasing its own [report and recommendations](#) for reconciliation and decolonizing Canada's libraries.

Moving forward with meaningful steps related to cultural relevance is a journey of self-discovery, and becoming a culturally competent educator can be an uncomfortable journey. As Canadians grapple with very difficult questions that challenge our understanding of history and as we deal with tumultuous current events, I believe that educators and librarians must come firmly on the side of access to information and information literacy, and the importance of forming opinions and making decisions based on critical consideration of the facts. The library is for everyone, a window to the wider world, and a safe place to inspire all learners and build relationships. School libraries and teacher-librarians, be we in Canada or in Australia, are perfectly placed to take leadership with our teaching colleagues, modelling culturally relevant and inclusive learning, and shifting school culture.

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Anita Brooks Kirkland is a writer, presenter and consultant, Anita Brooks Kirkland specializes in the areas of information and digital literacy and the role of the school library learning commons. She draws on her extensive experience as a teacher educator, both as an instructor in teacher-librarianship for the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), University of Toronto, and in her previous role as the Consultant for K-12 Libraries at the Waterloo Region District School Board. Anita was a contributing writer to *Together for Learning*, Ontario's guideline document for the school library learning commons. Anita is very active in professional organizations. She was the 2014 president of the *Ontario Library Association*, served as president of the *Ontario School Library Association* (2005) and co-chaired *The Association of Library Consultants and Coordinators of Ontario* (2011-13). She currently chairs the board of directors of *Canadian School Libraries*. Anita shares an extensive collection of program resources, articles, and presentations on her website and blog, www.bythebrooks.ca.