Cultural Humility in the School Library:
One Librarian's Perspective from a Montreal Public School
By Annette MacIntyre

In 1998, two doctors and cultural health researchers, Melanie Tervalon and Jann Murray-García, penned a journal article that has since led to a wide-spread shift in thinking about cultural understanding. They felt that the idea of "cultural competence", which was a prominent approach to serving multicultural communities at the time, was not serving the healthcare field. In their view, cultural competence implied the "mastery of a finite body of knowledge" with a "discrete endpoint" that didn't address the individual differences of each person (Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998, p. 118). In evolving the approach, they offered a new process: "cultural humility." While it continued to stress the importance of knowing as much as possible about communities, this respectful process also had three dimensions: lifelong learning and self-reflection; mitigating power imbalances; and institutional accountability. Recently, the approach has been taken up in the library field by Hurley, Kostelecky, Townsend (2022, 2023), and others. This paper presents personal reflections and examples of how I am working to understand and benefit from the cultural humility approach in my role as a K-11 public school librarian in Montreal. I wish to note that while it also references how I have been informed by my learning of Indigenous ways of knowing, many important aspects of Indigenous worldviews are missing, as this reflection is primarily oriented to the cultural humility framework.

Lifelong Learning and Self-Reflection

How I came to know about the approach

I chose librarianship in large part for its commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI). However, beginning a few years ago, I came to find myself misaligned with the tone of public conversation about EDI. I felt at odds with a discourse that seemed narrow, and sometimes even righteous, reductionist, and elitist (or, that even 'canceled' people). I repeatedly questioned the role of my own privilege and inherent biases in these private feelings of misalignment, yet this inner conflict persisted. Then, in late 2023, the Indigenous student support consultant at our school board introduced to me the concept of cultural humility. She had been providing guidance to a committee of school staff that I am a part of, as we sought to better understand our role in Reconciliation. In learning about cultural humility for the first time, I was struck by how Tervalon and Murray-García acknowledge the complex and multifaceted nature of every single person. This acknowledgement resonated with me as a way to strive to improve equity, diversity, and inclusion in a way that I found respectful and compassionate. In the context of librarianship, Hurley, Kosteleky and Townsend share this:

> "Rather than learning that specific groups are different in specific ways, cultural humility asks us to recognize that the person in front of us is different from us in ways we don't know and that can't be articulated. While differences often mean

differences based on race, religion or national origin, it can be just as important between people who check those same demographic boxes." (Hurley, Kosteleky & Townsend, 2022, p. 5).

Situating myself

I was born and raised in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, on the traditional territories of the Mi'kmaq and Peskotomuhkatiyik. My ancestors were Scottish Highlanders who settled on Cape Breton in the early 1800s, part of a large wave of immigrants who squatted on Indigenous lands, pushing out the Mi'kmaq from their ancestral place. Despite their own poverty, language barriers, and cultural oppression under British rule, the Highlanders relied on their cultural proximity to the colonizers, in particular their agricultural practices, which were seen as more legitimate than the migratory patterns of the Mi'kmaq. They were therefore rewarded with tracts of land, or with legal defense when they squatted without title. The legacy of this displacement resulted in the Scots building wealth and a strong sense of land-based cultural identity, accessing education, benefitting from freedom of movement, and expression of religious belief. In contrast, the Mi'kmaq faced generations of poverty, racism, abuse, dispossession, and oppression. I am an example of someone whose laboring class grandparents used their position and resources to enable my father to obtain an education, thus carving an easy path for me to follow. For the past 25 years I have worked in parliament, in inner-city public libraries and schools in Nova Scotia, and in urban and rural schools in Quebec. As part of the racial and class majorities in these provinces, I have often struggled to understand minority cultural differences. Tervalon and Murray-García's framework helps me to learn and reflect in a new and constructive way.

This year I created a teacher resource collection to support our school's Reconciliation initiative. The project took many months of learning and planning, and I was eager to present it to a new staff member who I had never met before, and who was joining our Reconciliation committee. I was also running on a high, having recently devoured Jo Chrona's book for non-Indigenous educators, *Wayi Wah! Indigenous Pedagogies* (2022) and was hoping to build a relationship with this new staff member based on the principles I learned in the book. Immediately, the staff member pointed out several flaws in the presentation of this collection. Looking back, I realize that my first mistake was expecting others to meet me where I was at in my learning process. With reflection, I have come to believe that this naive and entitled approach was rooted, at least in part, by several generations of inherited arrogance. Then, when my expectations of connection and validation weren't met by the staff member's reaction to my work, my ego winced, and it took me several days to recognize my defensiveness and to contend with my own insecurity related to my emerging knowledge.

In *Wayi Wah!* Jo Chrona stresses that non-Indigenous educators must learn to sit in places of unknowing and discomfort, where they can examine their own biases in order to begin to engage (Chrona, 2022, p. 13). I had taken copious notes from this book, recommended it to all staff at my school with an annotated review, and put it on display

in that same teacher resource collection. However, when it actually came time to sit in a place of discomfort, it was of course much easier for me to read about the practice of sitting in discomfort than to attempt it on my own. I see this discomfort as a necessary element of the active, lifelong process of cultural humility. Instead of the "false sense of security" (Murray-García & Tervalon,1998, p. 118), that can come from simply learning about something, cultural humility requires flexibility in seeing the cultural dimensions of each person's experience. In fact, "... an isolated increase in knowledge without a consequent change in attitude and behavior is of questionable value." (Murray-García & Tervalon,1998, p. 119). In this scenario, I was not acknowledging the cultural dimension of this staff member's experience. Once I was able to recognize that I was reacting with self-focus, I was able to give myself a cultural humility pep talk. Through self-reflection and commitment to learning, I was finally able to integrate the new staff member's feedback, improve the resource, and restore the path to a collaborative relationship with this staff member.

Mitigating Power Imbalances

In the second dimension of the process of practicing cultural humility, mitigating power imbalances, Murray-García and Tervalon emphasize the importance of the worker relinquishing the role of "expert", and instead becoming the "student" of the person being served. The two parties thus become partners in a mutual alliance. This year, I had two experiences that informed my understanding of this dimension. One experience taught me a humbling lesson in getting to know a student. The other made me question a core professional practice.

An "ESL" Learner

A new student came to our school this year, and in my typically ardent desire to support him, I quickly made several wrong assumptions about his language capacity. At our Montreal-based school, we have a small demographic of international students from east Asia, many of whom struggle in English, and most of whom speak no French. For the past few years, I have been tuned into the challenges faced by these students and have tried to support them by way of developing special collections. This student was friendly but quiet, with a limited way of speaking. I mentally assigned him to the category of a low-English, no-French speaker. What I learned, with time, was that this student came to us from a neighboring francophone school and was able to speak French. I also learned that he had a stutter, and that he was shy, both factors which were likely interfering with his communication in English. Once I actually sat with him to work on a project together, I was surprised by his facility in English. It was eye-opening to see that my quick assumptions created an inaccurate portrait of a student and his needs. But more than that, it was humiliating to admit that I had racially profiled this student. As Hurley, Kosteleky and Townsend state, "knowledge about a culture does not equate to knowledge about the individuals within that culture" (Hurley, Kosteleky & Townsend, p. 21). This experience taught me a very important lesson in withholding judgment, taking time, and asking better questions. Instead of deciding what to do on behalf of students, I need to learn how to collaborate with them by following the alliance

model proposed by Tervalon and Murray-García. Going forward, I need to remember that "one does not actually know someone else's identity, or how they see that identity impacting them… the power differential … is impacting the other person in problematic ways that may not be obvious from a position of power" (Hurley, Kosteleky & Townsend, 2022, p. 11).

Indigenous Knowledge

I have often been told, with admiration, that librarians "know everything". This is of course a falsehood based on our ability to find information. However, I do believe we benefit from the status that this perception affords us, thus creating a power imbalance between library workers and the people we serve. Recognizing and working to shift this power imbalance is not easy because it destabilizes our authority and serves as a major paradigm shift in how we operate. Cultural humility offers "a way to sit with your unknowing, to acknowledge the limits of your knowledge" (Hurley, Kosteleky & Townsend, 2022, p. 16). This year, I had an information-seeking experience that led me to question the librarian's way of knowing in relation to power.

In the fall, I was preparing resources for a high school class inquiry into harvest festivals. Although not on the list of festivals originally given to me by the teacher, I wanted to find out if our local Kanien'kehà:ka community in Kahnawà:ke celebrate a harvest festival. Although I couldn't find much information online, when I looked at the Kahnawà:ke community events calendar, I noticed many special harvest events listed for that very week. I excitedly called the community centre to ask for more information. In response, the receptionist kindly explained that this knowledge was actually protected by the community. She then took time to tell me a personal story of her son's naming ceremony, which took place during the harvest festival during the previous year. I left the conversation with a lot to process. I was very appreciative, in fact touched, that the receptionist had the generosity to share her personal story with me, a stranger, over the phone. (In Montreal, it is usually all business, all the time.)

It was also my first experience in beginning to understand Traditional Knowledge (TK) in a professional context. I had read about the library's role in protecting TK through the work of British Columbia-based librarians Martin Zhang (2023) and Sarah Dupont (Gaster, 2021), but having to navigate it in real life brought my learning to the next level. It was a watershed moment for me. Although I was trained to prioritize the privacy of personal information, this experience helped me to value the privacy of community information. It also made me evaluate the library's tenet of access to information. I began to wonder if this tradition facilitated a consumptive process, and about the potential for it to be a reciprocal one. I thought about the risk of failing to protect ceremonial knowledge, and the potential for that knowledge to be distorted, misrepresented, threatened, or destroyed, as has repeatedly happened in Canada for hundreds of years. It was a rare opportunity to reflect on my beliefs and to grow as a librarian, to ask myself how I can mitigate power imbalances by questioning my own training. As Cline and López-McKnight say,

"Cultural humility holds (or can hold) necessary space for… questions of knowing what one can and cannot, must not know… from the other. To orient through humility in this way destabilizes and refuses the logic and desire of coloniality's authority - its demand and right to know. This orientation… is antagonistic to the core mission, conceptual pillars, and purpose of the profession…" (Cline & López-McKnight, 2023, p. 183)

Institutional accountability

The final dimension of cultural humility is institutional accountability, achieved by developing mutually beneficial and non-paternalistic advocacy partnerships with the community (Murray-García & Tervalon 1998, 117). As a school librarian, my sphere of influence outside of the library itself often feels very limited. In Quebec, we live under several laws that further enforce the dominance of the cultural majority, and that directly and negatively impact our staff and students. Bill 21, Act respecting the laicity of the State (Gouvernement du Québec, 2024), bans teachers, among other workers, from wearing religious symbols. Muslim women are disproportionately affected by this discriminatory law, having to choose between their faith and their livelihoods. Bill 96, an amendment to The Charter of the French Language (Gouvernement du Québec, 2022), increases the level of French needed to graduate from CEGEP (college). This has harmful effects on many students, including immigrants and refugees. It also impacts Indigenous students, who often do not have the paperwork nor the French-skills needed to either qualify for enrolment, or to graduate. The context can feel dire, but I do believe there are ways to work collaboratively in resisting the ideologies that underpin these laws.

But first, I think we need to critically examine the hierarchies in our schools. After years of working in education, I have noticed an implicit power imbalance between staff in different job categories. Teachers, the largest group, dominate the conversation. Their presence is large, and their labour rights are the first to be negotiated. Next are the professionals and administrators, whose levels of education are often the highest. The student support workers, technicians, secretarial staff, and maintenance workers, with secondary or college-level qualifications, are, from my observation, considered to be at the bottom rung of the organization. They are rarely acknowledged at staff meetings, in training plans, or included in committee work. They tend to socialize separately, are often underemployed, and overrepresent the racialized staff in our schools. I believe, in the field of education, we have an inherent educational bias that creates a hierarchy of authority and belonging, erecting barriers to seeing and valuing the people we work with along lines of race and class. But I don't think it has to be that way, and I think it is possible to address, in part, on a school level. In relation to library service, I think that the perspectives and abilities of the entire school community offer an abundance of wisdom that can positively shape a school library in more profound ways than strictly following standards set by an outside institution, such as a professional association or a university.

Achieving these partnerships will take years of reflection, relationship-building, and advocacy, but I think some actions can be taken immediately. I recently asked our school board staff to replace the term "teachers" on our virtual library with the term "staff", and I am also changing physical signage in our library to reflect a more inclusive mindset. I am proposing a cultural committee to be formed at our school, with students and staff in various roles, to examine our school-wide approach to cultural understanding and celebration. I am also inviting staff in different roles to collaborate in shaping library collections and programming related to their personal or professional expertise. And, while this may be more of an intellectual than a cultural humility action, I am reaching out to professionals in bordering fields, such as psychology and guidance, to enlighten my perspective. For example, how can I better understand freedom of information from the lens of child development? My hope is that by collaborating, more opportunities will emerge to help decenter the library while at the same time strengthening it and making it more accountable.

Going forward

I recently spent some time volunteering at a day program for vulnerable adults. My job was to serve the morning breakfast. Because of the atmosphere created by the organization, as people approached the counter, I never knew who I was greeting: staff member or client. I was totally humbled by this equalizing approach. I would love to bring this way of being to the library and I believe it is possible by engaging with the dimensions of cultural humility.

To that end, my process will include: reflecting and sharing my learning; carefully getting to know students and staff, trying to catch myself as I make assumptions, and questioning the paradigm of accessing (conquering?) knowledge; collaborating with others in order to question library priorities and practices, and enrich the service. With practice, my understanding will evolve and deepen. It will also be shaped by other new learnings, such as my growing, but still very emergent, understanding of various Indigenous ways of knowing. Here and now, my hope is that the reader has gained a general understanding of cultural humility and has become interested in exploring how to use the process in their own work.

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