Redefined rhetorics: Academic discourse and Aboriginal students

(draft)

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When professors "give voice" to students' narratives, we validate students' perspectives and encourage them to question and challenge professional practices of the dominant culture….The classroom has become a microcosm of the wider socio-political and educational environments (Sanchez, 1997, para. 11).

Abstract
To Aboriginal[1] peoples, essay writing has symbolized the loss of languages, cultures, and people groups. However, the paradigms of classic Aristotelian rhetoric, as taught in introductory composition courses at university, are being reshaped, especially by theories such as new rhetorical genre theory (Giltrow, 2002, among others) that emphasize the socio-political contexts of knowledge. This shift creates greater opportunity for traditional, Aboriginal discourse conventions to be welcomed as frameworks for new knowledge.

These dynamics, in turn, make way for the process Bakhtin (1981) terms *hybridization*, the co-expression of "two or more different linguistic consciousnesses, often widely separated in time and social space" (p. 429) and resulting in what has been termed métissage (Zuss, 1997; Chambers, Donald, Hasebe-Ludt, 2002; Donald, 2003), the complementary co-existence of different voices in one place. These processes are especially significant for Aboriginal students who are positioned in both discursive communities as they learn academic discourse.

I outline the traits of classic rhetoric as they are encoded in written academic discourse and give a rationale for redefinition. Then I examine how conventional definitions of discourse are being expanded in a way that allows Native voices valid expression within the academic discursive community. Third, I summarize some of the new understandings and approaches in both discourses that open the way for the hybridization process to occur. These changes mean that university writing is becoming a discourse that connotes gain instead of loss for Aboriginal students.

Introduction
One story aptly illustrates how a breach of discourse perpetuates cultural havoc for the Blackfoot peoples. On September 22, 1877, after all night discussions, Mekasto or Chief Red Crow of the Kainaiwah Tribe (Blood), signed Treaty Seven, giving the Canadian government all rights to his people's lands. To the Blackfoot Confederacy, this *istisist aohkotspi* denoted "a sacred alliance" or an act of making peace and creating new relationship with the Canadian government, whereas to the representatives of the British government the word *treaty* signified the capitulation of land rights (*Calgary & Southern Alberta*: Treaty 7, 1997, para. 3). However, both sides now commonly admit

[1] I use the terms Aboriginal, Indigenous, and First Nations interchangeably.

that gaps in understanding between the two discourses used that day continue to provoke tensions between the Blackfoot peoples and the Canadian government (*Calgary & Southern Alberta*: Treaty 7, 1997).

Definitions

St. Claire (2000) succinctly captures the essential natures of the two rhetorical paradigms by comparing them as follows:

Figure 1: Information processing modes of print and oral cultures

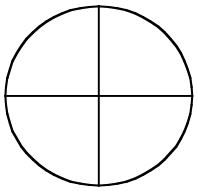
	Print Culture	Oral Culture
Cognition	Analytical Mode: Look for the details and not the whole	Synthesizing Mode: Look for the overall meaning and how the details fit together.
Processing	Sequential: Go from left to right.	Simultaneous: View everything at once just as one would view a painting.
Thought	Relational, Logical: Reason logically and use syllogisms. Put people into categories. Do not rely on emotions.	Affective, Emotive: Feelings are important. Use emotions to understand others.
Predilections	Mathematics, Science	Art, Music, Dance
Legitimization	Verbal Metaphor: Use metaphors based on language.	Visual Metaphor: Use metaphors based on the reorganization of visual space.
Literacy	Print, Technology	Orality, the Arts

(St. Clair, 2000, para. 23)

These two vastly different rhetorical paradigms create a disjunction for the Aboriginal writer. Blaire (as cited in St. Clair, 2000) rightly asserts that "[f]or the child of the Western tradition, the rhetorical style comes from the writings of Aristotle or from the essays of Cicero; but for the child of the oral culture, the Medicine Wheel and other strong visual imagery provide the essential metaphors of life" (para. 27).

Much of the violation of the Aboriginal culture has originated from the rejection or misunderstanding of its discursive structures. St. Claire (2000) recognized that teacher criticisms of Aboriginal student essays were actually descriptions of the cyclically organized, repetitive, and centre-focused discursive pattern he labels q*uaternity* (2000, para. 37) (See Figure 2). This paradigm, also noted by Chambers Erasmus (1989) and others as being intrinsic to First Nations discourse, has been the basis of rejecting the writing and ultimately the culture of Aboriginal students because it did not conform to the classic linear trinity of introduction, body, and conclusion (St. Claire, 2000, para. 36).

Figure 2: A Quaternity



St. Clair (2000)

Rationale for Redefinition

The reasons for redefining classic academic discourse paradigms as a means of opening a way for Aboriginal voices within academic discourse are many:

First, history clearly indicates that imposing a foreign discourse on First Nations peoples not only has failed to empower them within the new language, but also has destroyed their voices in their own languages.

Also, models such as Pike's tagmemic discourse theory (Young, Pike, & Becker, 1970), which move away from the uni-dimensional, monologic, definite, linear, and text-bound perspective of discourse in general and academic discourse in particular, create room for other rhetorical models. Discourses are now conceptualized as multidimensional, interactive processes where the boundaries between life and language are less relevant. And while the discursive patterns of people groups remain highly specified and distinct, the recognition of a shared social space as the basis for a shared discursive space where relevant knowledge is shared (Greymorning, 2000; Donald, 2003) creates more room for previously alienated voices within academic discourse.

Finally, the needs of my students, a cohort of about twenty mostly Blackfoot students whom I have taught introductory composition over the past eight months, have compelled me to ponder how these two very distinct discourses come together in the minds and experiences of my students. Questions rather than solutions predominate.

Academic Discourse Redefined

For the Aboriginal peoples traditional composition discourse has been defined as oppressive. Brown (2000), likens teaching the Western discourses as "[initiating] the native into the academic discourse community of his or her colonizer through mastery of its discourse conventions" (p. 95). Chambers Erasmus (1989) argues that radically different discourse paradigms undermine the learning process for Aboriginal students. Friere labels the result of this oppression "substantive multicultural existence" (as cited in Darder, 1991, p. xiii).

Furthermore, Giltrow (2002) acknowledges the oppressive role that typical composition instruction can take, when the *schoolroom essay* (what I have labelled classic Aristotelian rhetoric) is taught, not to educate, but to socialize and control youth and ultimately to stratify society. Giltrow points to new rhetorical genre theory as the means of redefining academic discourse in such a way that the "social and political contexts of knowledge" (p. 24) are recognized, while the forms with which the voices are expressed are not ignored. Thus, according to this theory, discourse participants highlight common themes, perspectives, and practices of the various participating

voices "not as rules but as signs of common ground amongst communities of readers and writers" (p. 24). In this way, the "diversity of expression will [more accurately] reflect the complexities of social life" (p. 26) and, by extension, overcome the colonizing tendencies of the dominant discourse by creating new cultural paradigms of the peoples who share a common social space.

Complementary to the ideas of new rhetorical genre theory are Bakhtin's conceptions of dialogical rhetoric that redefine discourse from a broader "extralinguistic or metalinguistic" perspective (Zappen, 2000, para. 6). Bakhtin defines knowledge as perceivable only in relationship with adjacent or related entities within a physical or social space; that is, literary texts cannot be understood in isolation but needed to be understood by observing their interaction – their dialogue – with surrounding social and political factors, or what Bakhtin (1981) calls a heterglossia of dialogised voices. He extends this redefinition to include the possibility of a hybridization of "different linguistic consciousnesses" (p. 429), allowing the possibility for different discourses to co-exist without competing against each other. Applied to composition theory, Bakhtin's ideas open the possibility for a discursive space in which the voices of all the participants are heard without judgement or acrimony and interact without subjugation or assimilation. This interaction is not meant to resolve, but to facilitate new knowledge. Donald (2003) explains that dialoguization is central within the concept of métissage; that is, ideas have no life unless they are in "rigorous dialogue" with other ideas (p. 9). This suggests a paradigm that not only permits but more so necessitates Aboriginal voices within academic discourse for new understandings to emerge.

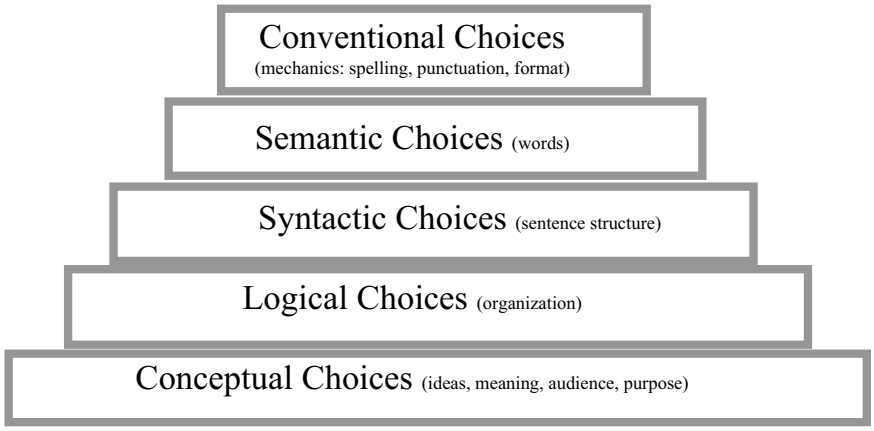
New Understandings of Classic Academic Discourse

The most significant new understanding of the more expansive denotation of written discourse is the shift towards accepting oral conventions within written discourse, or as Lakoff asserts, the reversal of the roles of spoken and written discourse resulting in "the oral medium [being] considered more valid and intelligible as a form of communication than the written" (1982, p. 240). He declares that "even written documents …now [tend] to be couched in forms imitative of the oral mode" (1982, p. 240). At the same time, he points to decreasing acceptance of the assumption that written discourse is "primary and preferable" (p. 240) and the only acceptable literacy (p. 239).

I see this shift to oral conventions on several levels of written academic discourse (See Figure 3). On the conceptual level, a marker of this shift is a greater emphasis on audience and purpose, this – of course – being a key feature of the Aboriginal narrative tradition, which is marked by its emphasis on immediacy and spontaneity (Lakoff, 1982, p. 239). On the logical level, a marker of this shift is the rising prominence of personal narrative within academic scholarship, especially in the fields of education and the social sciences. On the syntactical level, an interesting marker of the shift to oral convention is decreased stringency in the grammar of written discourse. For example, the *New COBUILD Student's Dictionary* (2002), which emphasizes a prescriptive over a descriptive approach to lexicography, boldly incorporates shifts of number in its entries. The entry for the word *heir* states, "Someone's heir is the person who will inherit their money, property, or title when they

die" (pp. 324 – 325) and incorporates shifts from the singular pronoun *someone* to the plural pronouns *their* and *they*, shifts labelled errors in conventional university discourse. This example points to increased acceptance of previously rejected conventions of oral discourse within written discourse.

Figure 3: Levels of Choice in Academic Discourse



(Dyck & Low)

A second significant understanding resulting from this redefinition process is the recognition that the language of the classroom is politicized; that is, it has a non-neutral role within its social context. Giroux's writings explore the relationships of culture and power and define the role of classroom writing as extending the "political sensibilities of …students" (as cited in Pozo, 2004, para. 5). This recognition extends the definition of academic discourse from merely an isolated, institutional exercise to a socially relevant act that has the power to effect change far beyond university walls, an act that reaffirms the Aboriginal culture and its mandate to defend cultural concerns.

New Understandings of Native Discourse

Parallel to these new understandings are two sets of changes that preserve and extend Aboriginal voices within academic discourse.

The first set of processes are occurring as Aboriginal scholars redefine research methodologies in ways that Aboriginal discourse remains more intact and is less violated. Tuhiwai Smith (2002) lists twenty-five *projects* or approaches for exploring Aboriginal culture. Her list includes claiming, testimonies, story-telling, celebrating survival, remembering, indigenising, intervening, revitalizing, connecting, reading, writing, representing, gendering, envisioning, reframing, restoring, returning, democratizing, networking, naming, protecting, creating, negotiating, discovering, and sharing (2002). These methods are less likely to preserve the Aboriginal discursive paradigms.

Belanger (2001) points to research methodologies that treating research as time-cured trust relationships rather than scheduled scientific investigations. Belanger proposes a *guided history* as "a partnership between a community and an academic,

whereby the expertise of both parties combine to produce a history that, due to the unique blend of methods and community-based information, could not otherwise be assembled" (p. 26). This method "[a]cknowledge[s] the primacy of the researcher's ethical responsibility even over academic concerns" (p. 29), emphasizing the Aboriginal moral view as it is encoded in the discursive patterns.

Another method advocated by Bellanger (2003) is Participatory Action Research (PAR) because it "attempts to empower disenfranchised people by building on the strengths of all those involved, necessitating community involvement from problem definition through research design and data interpretation" (p. 212). These changes (and others) in research paradigms allow Aboriginal voices to be heard with dignity within academia.

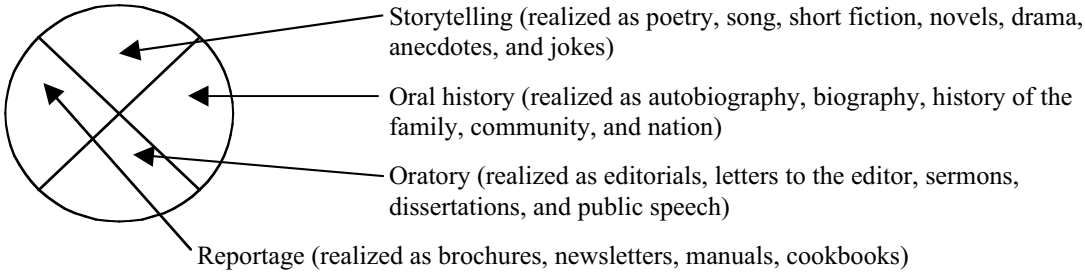
A second set of processes that are making way for the Aboriginal voices within academic discourse are the following recognitions. These recognitions were elicited from an interview with Ritchie Brown Chief Calf, Program Advisor in the University of Lethbridge's Native Transition Program as well as from a talk by Blackfoot Elder Bruce Wolf Child on the transfer of knowledge.

The first recognition is that Aboriginal languages, although primarily oral, also had an important, enduring, and intricate written format (Personal communication, R. Brown Chief Calf, 2005; Class lecture, B. Wolf Child, 2005). The Blackfoot peoples created petroglyphs in places such as Writing on Stone Provincial Park, in Southern Alberta, and pictographs of personal visions on tepees. Keeshig-Tobias states, "The spoken word and the printed word are part of our reality" (2003, para. 64).

Another recognition is the growing acceptance of writing as a valuable way of preserving the stories, the traditions, and ultimately the culture is by recording the stories of the elders, who are the "keepers of knowledge" even though "writing it [the Native traditions] down is almost a new thing for everybody" (Personal communication, R. Brown Chief Calf, 2005).

A third recognition is that dissertations and other types of academic writing can be considered a part of the storytelling circle (Keeshig-Tobias, 2003). She classifies academic discourse as a type of oratory, the third quadrant in the storytelling quaternity (See Figure 4).

Figure 4: Keeshig-Tobias' Storytelling Circle (2003)
(Diagram elicited from a description in paragraph 64. Idea is attributed to Jeanette Armstrong.)



A further recognition is that academic discourse gives its speakers prestige in the dominant community, increased wealth in relationship to the dominant community,

increased power in the dominant community, opportunities to gain position in the education system, and opportunities to develop stronger technology skills – five of the six criteria that linguist David Crystal identifies as factors in preserving an endangered language in his book *Language Death* (2000).

A fifth recognition is that non-Aboriginals can play a role in preserving Indigenous knowledge. One example is Hugh Dempsey, whose accounts of the Blackfoot culture and people have helped to preserve Blackfoot history. Another example is W.P. Kinsella, who – according to Brown Chief Calf, almost perfectly simulates an authentic Aboriginal voice in his stories (Personal communication, 2005). Some Aboriginals, however, are offended by non-Aboriginal writers who avoided the culturally accepted method of listening and engaging in *corrected-until-correct dialogue* with the elders, thus failing to "get it right" through repetition and retelling (Personal Communication, R. Brown Chief Calf, 2005). This tradition not only ensures accuracy but also upholds the spiritual lineage that is intrinsic in the storytelling process. Another response of anger to this recognition is caused because the Aboriginal peoples did not write down Indigenous knowledge even though the elders "have been aware of its [writing] importance for some time (Personal Communication, R. Brown Chief Calf, 2005).

An additional recognition is that academic discourse can be considered a sacred process in which knowledge is transferred. Brown Chief Calf observes that the Native students in Blackfoot religious societies and who own bundles, that is, they honour the sacred, are the ones who "graduate faster" because they recognize university instructors as "elders," they are used to listening intensely when knowledge is given, and they respect professors' as holding something akin to the sacred duty of an elder (Personal Communication, R. Brown Chief Calf, 2005).

The seventh and most important recognition is that learning academic discourse will prevent the types of misunderstandings that happened at the signing of Treaty Seven. Brown Chief Calf (2005), Chambers Erasmus (1989), and others cite cases where language researchers misinterpreted the elders, instead proposing that "in order … to get the story right, we should have had a Native person interpreting a Native person, and that Native person writing it down from the perspective of it being …historically correct…because some of our Native languages have more than one meaning and they [non-members of the discourse community] don't know [them]" (Personal Communication, R. Brown Chief Calf, 2005). Because of these types of violations Brown Chief Calf has set up the Traditional Kainaiah Study project on the Blood Reserve at Standoff, Alberta, in such a way that the elders must give a final approval to the recorded materials in order to ensure that correctness is guaranteed (Personal Communication, R. Brown Chief Calf, 2005). This recognition points to the necessity of First Nations discourse paradigms as necessary for an accurate and complete historical record.

These seven recognitions – that Aboriginal languages also have an intricate written form, that writing can also preserve Aboriginal traditions, that written conventions can also carry the important and sacred significance that oral narratives do, that written discourse can contribute to the preservation of Aboriginal languages, that non-natives have played a valuable but not perfect role in preserving Native culture,

that written academic discourse can be considered a type of transfer of knowledge from the keepers of knowledge to the students, and that written, academic discourse in the voices of Aboriginals can prevent the discourse disjunctions that, in the past, have wrecked much damage on Aboriginal cultures – can serve as starting places where the voices of Aboriginals can participate and raise their voices within the academic discursive community. This is a place of positive and non-destructive interaction. When asked if academic discourse continues to violate Aboriginal discourse, Brown Chief Calf summarized his opinion by stating, "Yes and no. No. Mostly no. It'll help us out" (Personal communication, 2005).

Conclusion

Despite these paradigm shifts, scholars recognize the difficulty of the journey ahead in raising the voices of Aboriginal students within academic discursive space. Stephen Greymorning (2000) who has taught in Canadian, American, and Australian universities reports a generally negative reception to his use of Indigenous perspectives and discourse paradigms in the classroom. Chambers Erasmus concurs that "the rhetoric of aboriginal people in formal contexts such as the classroom is not always accessible to nonaboriginal audiences" (1989, para. 6). Greymorning (2000) speaks on behalf of First Nations people when he says "[When we] find ourselves at a table of our own making within Anglo created institutions, there are times when we are subjected to people coming to our table only to walk away before our story has been fully told" (para. 41).

The process of hybridization, where the voices of Aboriginal writers are recognized for their own merit within academic discourse, is far from being fully realized. Even so, doorways that welcome Aboriginal discourse are becoming more apparent within conventional academic writing. Classic discourse paradigms are being redefined in ways that allow more room for Aboriginal students to bring their discourse with its unique perspectives and ways of knowing within even the staunchly defended parameters of academic discourse.

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