

Re-legitimizing the Spoken Word

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The NL Context

In many ways the Economic Recovery Commission (ERC) was 30 years before its time. Dedicated to the concept of rural NL as home to an educated population living in electronic villages connected to the world by the internet, it also stressed “the fundamental importance of sustainability, sound environmental management, and community stewardship.” (House, 1999)

Doug House’s classic expose of “old guard “ networks within NL bureaucracies, *Against the Tide*, describes how the visionary ERC was essentially “stabbed in the back” but the book also describes a fatal error on the part of the ERC.

“I and the commissioners also had difficulty in popularizing our approach to economic development. Although we produced many reports and booklets outlining our point of view, these were not widely read in what is mainly an oral culture.” (House, 1999)

My argument is that the mistake of the ERC is still being committed today by NL institutions, generally centered in St. John’s, including Memorial University. ¹

We are an oral culture.

Background to Re-legitimization of the Spoken Word

My original intent was to write an essay which would attempt to clarify and bring up to date MUN’s policy for a PhD portfolio. As a mixed media communicator in 2021, an obsession with the written word alone seemed somewhat archaic, especially when the entire university has turned to virtual education.

Then as I learned more about indigenous concerns (from this course and from my PhD mentor, Calvin White) it seemed I could possibly write in support of an indigenous pedagogy as well.

One thread of this project is Open Systems Thinking (OST - a global social science point of view); another is what I’m learning about the Mi’Kmaq oral tradition (I’m only scratching the surface and skating on thin ice);

while the third thread is autoethnographic ² - my own personal point of view based on practical experiences as an educator and communicator in multiple international cultures.

This essay is very much a work in progress and will continue on a “living website” (www.ryakuga.org/spokenword/). Supporting this essay are oral documents uploaded to the site including interviews with Calvin White and a presentation to the Grenfell PhD students by Arlene Blanchard and Calvin.

In an April 19, 2021 zoom interview, Calvin directly addresses the topic of this essay and the relationship between the university and the Mi’Kmaq. I acknowledge that Calvin is the lead presenter in this project and he “restores the primacy of the spoken word.”

Open Systems Theory (OST)

Mohawk scholar Phillip Deering (Concordia PhD) is a practitioner of OST.

“Open Systems Theory (OST) as primarily developed by Fred and Merrelyn Emery in Australia provides an integrated set of concepts and constructs in both theory and practice to more accurately describe reality.”

Phillip emphasizes how her upbringing in aboriginal culture has influenced the development of OST.

“She learned the Barkindji language of her river-people classmates. Merrelyn’s liberal (matriarchal) upbringing allowed her mind to experience thought beyond the limits of English hierarchic-systems thinking to include the collaborative-systems thinking of the Barkindji. Extensive and continuing research has concluded that peoples from oral cultures had large vocabularies and great flexibility of mind...”

“Emery would have experienced the rational thought of the Barkindji and easily concluded that rational thought is a natural attribute of all humans, rather than something needing to be learned in a hierarchic way from a Western body of knowledge.”

Phillip quotes personal communication with Merrelyn:

“I consider myself to have spoken an Aboriginal language when I was a kid, unfortunately lost now, although I know it’s still there, as I have dreamt in it occasionally. I credit it for a lot of my intellectual flexibility and understanding.”

In 2003 I was working in western Newfoundland with multiple partners and communities on a federal Rural Secretariat funded project, Enlarging the Circle. As one component of the project, we introduced the OST practice of the Search Conference – and Merrelyn actually came to Stephenville to design and manage a provincial OST workshop. By then I had moved on to teach in Abu Dhabi but over the years we continued to communicate (she was interested in the pedagogy of the journalism program I coordinated and designed (collaboratively) – the Incubator Concept).

Then in early 2019, she invited me to a Participative Design/Search Conference course, free of charge if I could get there. (I travelled on the last of my “points” and stayed in hostel dorms.” The course was hands on, practical how to do but I also carried home with me one message. OST is built on 40,000 years of Aboriginal participatory democracy.

Fred Emery and the Spoken Word

Fred Emery is now recognized as a leading Australian social scientist (he died in 1997) but during World War 2, he was hiding out in the bush with the Aborigines. Rather than paraphrase what he has to say about the spoken word, I shall let him speak for himself (I have permission from Merrelyn.)³

“One element in particular involves the status difference between spoken and written language which needs addressing and redressing. Spoken language is probably as old as humanity itself, but written is an innovation which needs further evaluation. We are hard-wired to speak but not to read and write. It is possible to sustain an argument that the elevation of the written was not more than another highly successful ploy by the already successful to exploit their advantage in a stratified society. Continuous complaints about the destruction of the

English language (as it was spoken and written by Chaucer perhaps?) neglect the fact that any living language is precisely that, living and changing in correlation to the changing circumstances of the times. “ (Emery, 1993)

“Written language, text, has been used to keep the great unwashed in their place. Peirce's work has shown how treacherously the rulers can put down the 'unlettered' people who use only their spoken language to communicate their reality. 'If we can prevent them coming together and also believing that their conversations have validity, we can maintain control.' Perhaps the greatest power inhering in spoken language lies in its spontaneous generation of metaphors and these are most dangerous when they are immediate and apart. Far from the abstract form, people use day-to-day metaphors which are immediately recognizable and which they can draw up as simple diagrams and/or other iconic forms of communication; eg., the cartoon. Critical and rigorous distinctions can be made at this level and rather than the academic conclusion that these do not convey precise meaning, they show that people can engage in debates and analysis of highly complex matters by metaphorically illustrating the essences of such debates.” (Emery, 1993)

“Clearly, if we are to pursue the elevation of design principle two and participative rather than representative democracy, we must also work to return spoken language to its proper place as the prime form of human communication. That can only be achieved by discourse under the conditions of openness and equality laid down by Asch (1952). Only then do we find association rather than dissociation, or any of the other maladaptions.”

“Asch has made similar advances in analysing the informational properties of face-to-face social environments (Emery and Emery, 1976, pp. 20-26). Heider and the socio-linguists have made real beginnings in the analysis of the invariances that carry the informational properties of conversational fields.

The latter has probably been one of the most striking challenges to our everyday conceptions and bids fair to revolutionize our ideas about speech as a medium compared with text.

In keeping with the traditional paradigm we have tended to assume that in listening to speech the sounds we hear are assimilated to learnt vocabularies and grammars and that we make use of other clues to infer what the other is meaning. For a long time psychiatrists, particularly those working in small group settings, have had their doubts about this. They have become convinced they can hear another level of conversation, what they call the "music" of the conversation, and that it is out there to be listened to and not at all like the process of making conscious inferences from a few clues. Studies such as that by Labov and Fanshel (1977) leave us in no doubts about that. They show that perceivable invariances in conversational fields directly yield us information about invariances in the dynamics of interpersonal interaction (see also Heider, 1958). They find this so compelling that they insist that speech must be seen as an action that directly changes the environment of the other (Emery, 1980).

These findings have been generalized to cover music as well as speech by Jones (1976) using the mathematics of invariances found in group theory. In this, and in Gibson's most recent work (1979), we find that our perceptual systems appear to have evolved to cope with a world that is remarkably similar to the world that modern physics describes: a world which is a nested hierarchy of spacetime events structured by invariant relationships of relations. The world in which we perceive is, like the world perceived by modern physicists, inhomogeneous, an-isotropic and discontinuous. So long as we thought that the problems of epistemology were the problems of how we perceived objects in a homogeneous, isotropic and continuous Euclidean space, existing as an absolute, independent of objects, and how we perceived change in a time that was independent of space and objects, then, for just so long, we were bound to be defeated in our task." (Emery, 1993.)

Fred's mental gymnastics demand analysis and reflection, but the message is clear. Speech is not only the most effective form of communication but it also is the most human with its emotional nuances and, even beyond body language – the music of the room. Also of note is the earmarking of written language as a weapon to maintain dominant, hierarchial structures.

Marshall McLuhan

Trying to move back and forth between NL and NS during the pandemic, I've spent much of this year in isolation – including the last two months in self isolation trying to keep up with an extremely demanding virtual PhD program. But last week I visited a Belgian neighbour, management consultant for universities and government departments, to discuss a procedural problem. He wasn't interested until I mentioned this essay over supper. First he said legitimization was incorrect – it should be re-legitimization and he proceeded to lecture me on the global history of oral communication, including details of indigenous history. As I left, he loaned me a posthumous book of lectures and interviews with Marshall McLuhan.

“Educators naturally feel that their job is to maintain the educational establishment, and to preserve and advance the values so long associated with its procedures. Right now, this means, for example, that we are going to insist that Johnny acquire the art of reading, if only because print is the matrix of Western industrial method in production, and print teaches consumer habits and outlooks as well.” (McLuhan, 2003)

“Any medium of communication is, like an art form, an extension of one or more of our senses. Speech alone is an extension of all of our senses at once.” (McLuhan, 2003)

“In the electronic age, when time and space factors are very much reduced in information flow, it is once more natural for us, as for men in small oral communities, to think mythically.” (McLuhan, 2003)

“One of the many prices we paid for abstracting ourselves from the tribal, multi-sensuous world was that we came to rely more and more on number to get us back into relation to that tribal world.” (McLuhan, 2003)

“The ‘message’ of radio is that of the global tribal drum (the Hemingway Bell) awakening the most primal memories, disturbing literate visual man with a deep sense of his incompleteness and with a guilty awareness of selfish separateness and individualism.” (McLuhan, 2003)

“Fifth century Athens was the first human community to experience the shift from oral to visual in literate culture. It was the first human community to detribalize and to disintegrate its oral tradition. It was the first to

discover the privileges and the anxieties of individual identity and , as you are familiar, our time is obsessed with the problem of identity and the quest for identity.” (McLuhan, 2003)

“The present century is the first in which detribalized Westerners have begun to experience the reverse shift from written to oral culture. “ (McLuhan, 2003)

“One of the reasons that literacy created vast military organizations in the ancient world was that it became possible to control men at a distance by means of written messages and couriers.” (McLuhan, 2003)

McLuhan, of course, became a celebrity in the 60s and love him or hate him, nobody can deny that, along with Chomsky, he was probably the predominant communications theorist of his era. But here we read similar messages as Emery – writing is a weapon of control and dominance; the connection of oral communication to collaboration collectives (the tribe), and the implied superiority of oral communication.

Mikmawisimik

One of my favourite books in the past decade has been Yale academic John Mack Faragher’s A Great and Noble Scheme: The Tragic Story of the Expulsion of the French Acadians from their American Homeland.

Footnote.

It is also the story of the Mi’Kmaq and My Place – meticulously researched with 80 pages of footnotes and references. The book was perhaps my introduction to the language of the Mi’Kmaq.

“Mikmawisimik – part of the Algonquian family of languages, which continues to be spoke by an estimated ten thousand Mi’Kmaq today – is a verb based language that takes its structure from the relationships among things. It becomes increasingly complicated with the variety of components, conditions, relations, and feelings affecting perception and requiring expression. To illustrate how sophisticated such modes could become, one student of the language talks of the Mikmaw hunter who in a single word was able to convey his state of mind as he stalked a bear in the middle of the woods: the hope he would meet his prey, the fear that he would be killed in the encounter, and the love he felt for his wife and children, for whom he was hunting. “ (Faragher 2005)

Faragher describes how the Jesuits were unable to grasp the complexity of Mi'Kmaq thought and language as it had evolved over thousands of years – accentuating McLuhan's observation of how much has been lost for those of us who have moved or been moved into the world of the written word.

Stories from the Six Worlds

It has been suggested to me that Ruth Holmes Whitehead has no business writing about Mi'Kmaq oral tradition but Ivan J has obviously read her work and Marie Battiste writes about going with her to the archives so I'm going to take a chance by saying I am totally fascinated by Stories from the Six Worlds.

Her descriptions are poetic and reaffirm McLuhan's observation about how much we lose by taking up on the world of written communication. One loss is the world of imagination and myth (very close to R.D. Laing's theory of how much moderns have lost by abandoning life in dreams).

“Long before their world began to be described in writing, and their history set down in books, the People described it, remembered it, and by word of mouth passed it on to the generations which came after them. ‘What was my amazement...at discovering, day after day, that there existed among them, entirely by oral tradition, a far grander mythology than that which has been known to us by either the Chippewa or Iroquois Hiawatha Legends, and that this was illustrated by an incredible number of tales.’ The Mi'Kmaq histories were songs and stories.” (Whitehead, 1988)

“Truly, then, it is their surviving stories that are the great historical and cultural wealth of the Mi'Kmaq. For only in their stories do we hear the People themselves speaking about their world; only in their tales are we given glimpses of how their universe arose, in all its fascinating Otherness, and how the Persons therein were expected to conduct themselves.” (Whitehead, 1988)

“Within the framework of the traditionally long storycycles, individual storytellers often transferred elements from one cycle into another. The intent or whim of the teller was the string onto which episodes, actions, characters and messages were threaded like beads. Such “beads” could change their colour or form as well, so each retelling of the story, even by the same person, might be different. The structure was fluid, accommodating itself to the teller’s will. All its elements could change their shapes, their content.” (Whitehead, 1988)

“The Mi’Kmaq language, the original medium for these stories, is equally fluid. Its use of verb phrases, with hundreds of prefixes and suffixes, means that there are very few fixed and separate words in the language. The full conjugation of one Mi’Kmaq verb would fill quite a large volume,” wrote Rand about a language he found “copious, flexible, and expressive.” In a very real sense, the speaker creates the vocabulary as he goes along, minting verb phrases to meet the needs of the moment, to give the very finest detailed shades of meaning. Words, in Mi’Kmaq, are shape changers as well, following the intent of the speaker.” (Whitehead, 1988)

Autoethnography and Participatory Methodology

The most significant factor in this discussion of the spoken word is the voice of Calvin White – what he says. The recording is basically unedited – there is no interpretation. My questions are only so I could learn more from what he said.

My treatment of the “speakers” in the written essay is similar. Although I chose quotes that to me, were relevant to a discussion of the spoken word and oral cultures, again I didn’t interpret but let them have their say. After all, how could I paraphrase Fred Emery or Marshall McLuhan?

Although Paul Whitinui writes eloquently about indigenous autoethnography, (Whitinui 2014) the concept of ethnography resonates for me (I’m not indigenous), especially in the time of the pandemic when many of us spend so much time in isolation, sensitive to our place and , with the future so unknown, our roots.

Perhaps my interest in this discussion of the spoken word, with special focus on the Mi’Kmaq local culture ,is influenced by a sense of place living on the river where Mi’Kmaq lived for thousands of years. Perhaps it is

being aware that my mother's great-great grandmother, Ester Faa Blythe, was elected leader of the Scottish Roma (Clebert tells us that, like Inuit, Roma means People). (Clebert 1963)

I might go out on a limb and suggest while the written word is best for autocratic hierarchial structures, for participatory democratic collaborations, the spoken word with face to face communication is best.

Open Systems Theory is all about Participative Design for Participatory Democracy –the title of one of Merelyn's books. For decades, my professional life has focused on participatory process and communications with the mixed community media tools of video; community television; audio; community radio; internet radio, and living websites.

About 1999 Ryakuga was contracted to evaluate the NL Communities in Schools program. We examined various evaluation methodologies and discovered participatory evaluation, mainly in the health sector. But where they wrote out the answers to the evaluation questions (sometimes using a separate person to write down the emotional response) we used small format video. It worked well and was requested for other projects.

In preparing a proposal for the TRSU program, it was obvious that the research methodology would be Participatory Action Research, again pioneered by the health sector. It is very compatible with self help community development practice which, in essence, supports the community in doing what it wants to do. In Flat Bay community radio events, the people control a process of "voice, visibility and vision". (Whitinui, 2014)

In 1993 I went to Mexico for a conference in the mountains of AMARC (the global community radio network); it was the first time global community radio indigenous groups had ever met together (I went representing the Belize Newfoundland Linkage and lobbying for support for Garifuna radio.)

The motto of the conference was All the Voices – a call out that I have used ever since.

The PHD Portfolio

My supervisor has been making inquiries about what MUN will permit in a PhD Portfolio which is a choice instead of a conventional thesis. We have discussed proposing an E-Book; Living Website; Podcasts, and YouTubes. As of now, there has not been a reply from St. John's.

Information in support of Indigenous Pedagogy

It would seem Calvin has spoken to this far better than anything I could write.

What next?

This is a work in progress. Next I will update www.ryakuga.org/spokenword especially with the presentation by Calvin and Arlene Blanchard where Arlene makes suggestions for using other methods for research reporting, such as art. One of my TRSU colleagues has responded to that suggestion, especially concerning ideas for a PhD Portfolio. Other people have expressed interest in this topic, such as Rob McMahon of the University of Alberta and the First Mile initiative.

Topics that should be included are perhaps Living Treaties and oral history, as well as perhaps Two Eyed Seeing.

I also want to add a section on the ethics of All the Voices. (A suggestion of my supervisor is a Fieldworker's Handbook – based on the methodology of MUN extension which Calvin describes time and time again.) In participatory communications the speaker (or artist) always owns her/his own voice. In a university setting, university policy, including indigenous policy, would have to be considered.

Another concept, which is just emerging for me, is that the dichotomy is not only between the spoken word and the written word but also between Euro-centric written/spoken word and the millennia old oral communication of People globally. For me, this is related to suggestions, from McLuhan and others, about the richness of oral traditions that encompass nature, myth and the collective unconscious.

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Footnotes

- 1 House describes in detail how the government bureaucracy attacked the ERC. "The most important control technique used by the Old Guard is the artful management of information." "The most invidious technique employed by the Old Guard was the discrediting of people, discrediting

of their work... discrediting was subtle.” “ The final technique of the Old Guard in coping with the ERC, when all else failed, was co-optation and incorporation. By ‘co-optation’ I mean taking other people’s ideas and presenting them as one’s own; by ‘incorporation’ I mean subsuming such ideas and, in some cases, the people who represent such ideas, into one’s own organization.”

2 My youngest daughter, who lives in Berlin as a writer and designer for the arts, is very critical of my interest in, for example, Australian aboriginal culture – saying I am “exoticizing” and “othering”. (She even criticizes me for my interest in our Scottish Roma ancestors). Also, frankly, I felt very much an outsider, even a voyeur, in the indigenous virtual class. Then I read Paul Whiting – and I, although not indigenous, totally related. This entire project is autoethnography conscious as opposed to Euro-centric journalist and academic detachment.

3 It would seem to be fair to suggest that the basic tenet of this project – restoring the primacy of the spoken word in a university context – is somewhat radical. Calvin actually addresses the concept in his interview – unedited and uninterpreted as he speaks for himself on a topic he knows far more about than me. I am learning what he teaches. I follow a similar interview approach with the other “speakers” I reach out to. For example, I use a lot of lengthy quotations rather than snip out a few words here and there, then interpret. Again, the methodology differs from Euro-centric journalists and academics.

