

## **Literacy Practice in a Canadian Urban Neighborhood: Two First Nation Mothers**

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### **Objectives or purposes:**

This paper focuses on the literacy practices of two First Nation mothers who live in a low income Canadian urban neighbourhood and investigates how their historical literacy practices have influenced their present literacy practices.

### **Perspective(s) & Theoretical Framework:**

This study is shaped by an underlying theoretical assumption that literacy is cultural practice, shaped by and shaping social factors such as culture, gender, politics, and economics (Barton, Hamilton & Ivanič, 2000; Purcell-Gates, 1995; Street, 1984). To study 'literacy', thus, demands that it is studied 'in situ' – in practice -- since domains of social activity are mediated by literacy events (Wertsch, 1998).

Literacy is most often taught in schools as decontextualized, technical skills, and many suspect that this disconnect between school literacy and home/community literacies is holding back literacy development for children, particularly those whose home literacies are undervalued and ignored by the schools (Dewey, 1956; Dyson, 1993). Literacy differs in different cultures, communities, and times and plays a role in shaping those times and places. Therefore, context and motivation play a role in examining literacy practices and it is important to associate these practices within the larger purpose and aim of reading and writing (Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanic, 2000).

Street (1999) asserts that there are different forms of literacy in different sociocultural contexts. Barton (1994) also argues that different literacies are privileged in different institutions which are controlled by a dominant power in each institution. Thus, literacy is not in any one form nor autonomous, but multiple and ideological.

Because literacy is shaped based on social and cultural contexts, when looking at the Aboriginal experience with literacy, it is necessary to consider the cultural values and the historical experiences that have influenced the lives of the Aboriginal people.

Traditionally, Aboriginal family and community members taught children the skills, values and beliefs needed. However, upon colonization of Canada and the writing of the Native Act, the federal government took over the responsibility of educating Aboriginal children. Their agenda was to assimilate these children into western culture by separating them from their families and communities and stripping them of their language, values, and beliefs (Assembly of First Nations, 1994). The government then turned the responsibility of schooling these children to churches and this is where the damage to culture and identity of the Aboriginal people lies. Students at these schools faced physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. They were separated from their families and did not have the opportunity to partake in the literacy practices of their families or communities.

Research has shown that the literacy development of children is associated to the literacy practices and behaviors of parents, families and homes (Leichter, 1984; Freeman and Wasserman, 1986). The literacy development of the Aboriginal population consequently was inhibited because they were removed from these natural literacy

environments. This literacy development was further stunted by the low quality of education provided to the students while at the residential schools. Those in power had low expectations of the Aboriginal students and did not expect them to achieve academically (Barman, Hebert, & McCaskill, 1986). Therefore only basic literacy skills were taught and much time was spent on reforming these children through religious doctrine. Much focus was also placed on occupational training such as developing housekeeping and farming skills which was thought to be the basis of their future vocations. Barman, Hebert, & McCaskill (1986) describe it in the context of the hierarchy: “curriculum was to be limited to basic education combined with half-day practical training in agriculture, the crafts, household duties in order to prepare pupils for their expected future existence on the lower fringes of the dominant society” (p. 6).

### **Methods:**

This study was sponsored by the larger Cultural Practices of Literacy Study (CPLS) which has as its goal to document literacy in practice in different socio-cultural contexts around the world and to use the insights gained from the studies to think about and design more culturally-congruent literacy instruction for children from minority cultural groups (<http://educ.ubc.ca/research/cpls/>).

It focuses on a community that is served by one of the schools that rank in the lowest quartile of achievement in the province of British Columbia, Canada. The school and its community were chosen according to purposive sampling techniques with the purpose of including a school community with a high percentages of factors typically associated with low achievement: Income, English as an Additional Language (EAL) status, and parent education. This information was accessed from the statistics gathered by The Fraser Institute (<http://www.fraserinstitute.org/>) and crossed checked with the British Columbia Ministry of Education website (<http://www.gov.bc.ca/bced/>) and other research studies in various fields.

Data collection methods included: (a) participant observations; (b) textual artifact collection; and (c) literacy practice interviews with parents who volunteered for the study.

#### *Participant Observation:*

I spent 10 hours a week for two months observing this community and participating in it in various ways including eating at restaurants, shopping at grocery and novelty stores, riding public transit, and exercising at the community center. I took field notes of the literacy practices around me. I jotted down all instances when people were interacting with text.

#### *Textual Artifact Collection*

I collected flyers, newspapers, notices and other such materials from around the community. Additionally, I took field notes and photos of the text within the community. This included texts such as street signs and clothing labels.

#### *Literacy Practice Interviews*

I solicited 10 participants for the interviews by posting flyers on and near the school grounds and by distributing notices to parents of children who attend the local

elementary school. The parents were prompted to report all of the different types of texts they read or wrote in the course of their daily lives. I asked them about their current and historical literacy practices both in and out of school. For each literacy practice mentioned, I elicited information about the purpose and social content of that practice and whether it was an important or fulfilling part of the participants' lives. I offered prompts to assist in recalling information. This was especially needed during the recollection of historical literacy practices. The interviews were transcribed after the interview sessions.

All of the field notes, artifacts, and interview transcripts were loaded into the qualitative data management program *ATLAS.ti* and coded according to the coding protocol for the larger CPLS project. Each literacy event (observed, reported, or inferred from artifacts) was coded for the following: (a) Social activity domain (e.g. work, entertainment); (b) Mode (reading or writing); (c) Text and form (e.g. horoscope, magazine); (d) Function (the communicative purpose guiding the actual reading/writing); (e) Purpose (the social purpose of the literacy event); and (f) Language.

For this particular paper, I selected only the interviews of the two First Nation mothers who had been removed from their childhood homes and placed in the residential schools. I compared their data with one another and with the interviews of the other eight participants including two First Nation mothers who did not attend residential schools.

**Data sources:** Data sources for this paper consisted of observations photos texts found within the home and literacy practice interviews.

## **Results and Discussion:**

### **The Community**

This culturally diverse and exciting neighbourhood with novelty shops, ethnic restaurants, and lush parks within only a few feet of the school is inundated with textual information in both print and digital format. Teenagers roam the streets text messaging, young adults sit at coffee shops and type on their computers, homeless individual sit on park benches and complete crossword puzzles and almost everybody reads the signs and labels in shops. The streets are inundated with regulatory signs: No Parking, No Smoking, and No Loitering. Employment postings fill newspapers and symbols of community in the form of banners, posters, and t-shirts strive to unify the neighbourhood.

### **The People**

The interviews of 10 parents further pointed to the variety of textual practice involvement. This paper will focus on the literacy practices of two of these parents, Aileen and Charlotte (pseudonyms are used). Because of their Aboriginal ancestry and the historical context of their lives, these two participants fell into a community of their own.

#### **Aileen**

Aileen agreed to allow me to interview her in her home. She had a modest ground floor apartment that consisted of a kitchen, living room and small bedroom. She had laid out blankets on the floor of the living room that served as her son's bed. Beside the bed

sat a basket of picture books. Aileen invited me to sit on a plastic chair at her kitchen table as she cleared off ashtrays filled with cigarette butts and brushed to one side the paper clutter. Once the interview was on its way, Aileen began to share her history with me as many questions I asked her could not be answered because they did not relate to her life experiences.

The Canadian government took Aileen away from her family when she was in grade one and placed her in a residential school for Aboriginal youth in the attempt to “civilize” and “westernize” her and other youth of indigenous descent. Children such as Aileen were forcefully removed from their parents and placed in schools where they were indoctrinated in the Christian religion and European culture. There, Aileen and many of the other children faced physical, sexual, and emotional abuse. Aileen stayed at the residential school for three and a half years before her mother removed her and then stayed in a detention facility for three years before she escaped. She said, “after my mom took us out from the residential school, I was only at home with her for a month and a half before they put me in a, what do you call that, detention hold, when I was twelve. So from there until when I was fifteen I was there and then I’d go to school for a while and then from there I ran and that was it.” During her whole childhood Aileen moved around quite a bit and at times stayed with different family members. This was especially the case during the summer months when students were released from residential schools.

At fifteen, when Aileen was on her own and living on the streets, she turned to alcohol. During the next decade of her life, Aileen gave birth to five daughters but had to give them up to the government because she was an alcoholic and on welfare. She said, “Because I never had any parenting skills, all my kids were taken from me when I was young, because of the alcohol and being on the welfare, right?” These five children are now adults and do not live with Aileen like her young son does.

During the time when Aileen was living on the streets, she ended up being incarcerated on a few occasions. During these incarcerations, Aileen took advantage of government organized parenting programs and worked toward receiving certificates for mothering and life skills. She said, “Like, all I did was drink out there and whatever. And then I ended up going in and out of jail too much, so I just figured while I was in there, I’d do something. Yeah, so I was taking [classes], like I took this one [showing a certificate from a parenting class] before I got out. I was trying to get some education.” She also mentioned that she partook in a “change your life seminar,” for which she also proudly showed off her certificate.

Aileen’s motivation to educate herself was evident throughout my meeting with her. The very first thing she said to me upon the start of the interview was “I’m trying to educate myself, that’s why I have the dictionary and some books. Because I quit school a long time ago, when I was fifteen.” And indeed, there were many novels, a dictionary, and self-help books scattered on the kitchen table and a nearby counter top. The self-help books were of particular interest as they pointed at the need for Aileen to heal the wrongful acts inflicted on her. She was reading books like *The Art of Selfishness* which was about dealing with the oppression she faced and the tormenters that had plagued her life, and *Feel the Fear and Do it Anyway* which was about learning to cope with various types of fears such as self-assertion and loneliness.

Also, with uncertainty and a tinge of embarrassment, Aileen chuckled and told me about her possible plans of starting more formal education. She said, “I’m trying to get

some information on the school over here, because I might try it, but I'm not too sure though." I wasn't sure if her embarrassment came because she doubted her ability to succeed academically, she questioned her right to an education, or she feared the late age in which she wanted to pursue it. Nevertheless, the desire to get educated was apparent.

Aileen is not only on the path to seeking knowledge, she is also contributing to it. She is in the process of putting together a collection of her own poetry. She showed me over 100 pages of poetry that she had typed up on a typewriter. The poems were all about her experiences in the residential schools and the circumstances in which these experiences have led her. "I write, like I'm keeping a diary now," she said. "The rest I didn't type out, it's still over there. All of this was the life I was living on the street and all that." Her poems had titles such as "The Path to Healing." She writes under her "Indian name which was given to [her] in a sweat lodge" by an elder. Similar to the self-help books that she reads, her poems act as stepping stones toward healing her tumultuous history. This is a distinctive difference from her past education where she never wrote poems nor journaled. Now though, she is "trying to get a book together... and get this published." She persists with this goal despite obstacles like lack of equipment, contacts and resources. She said, "I just threw that typewriter out, it broke on me" and "this is my only copy" of my poems.

Her motivation to educate herself through books, writing and courses has allowed her to develop the life skills necessary to take care of her son. Her innate interest in learning and text has given her the motivation to assist her son in developing literacy skills. She provides him with picture and chapter books that she reads to him in the evenings, she posts a cardboard clock on the wall so he learns to tell time, she helps him with his speech impairment by reciting or chanting nursery rhymes, animal songs, and Dr. Seuss books and she helps him practice his writing. Presently, "he can write his name and he can write some of the alphabet, but he can't write a sentence." This practice is distinctly different from Aileen's own childhood experiences that lacked access to children's literature. She said, see all these different books [pointing to her son's picture books], these books for the children, they're all different now. Yeah, because we didn't have all this when I was growing up."

Aileen spends much of her time at home and as a result did not comment much on texts with which she interacts in the community. She said, "I hardly go out, except to the food bank or to go volunteer... The only place I go once in a while is to Bingo," and there we just read the Bingo cards.

Many of Aileen's literacy practices have to do with the act of reading and filling out official document forms. For example, she spends much time with forms and documents from "Social Services when you have to fill out those little welfare stubs saying that we need help." Also as a result of the recent developments of the Canadian government's "Reconsideration Process" where they reassess claims of the indigenous population that were placed in residential schools to verify eligibility for compensation, Aileen has been receiving official documents in the mail that require her to read this technical text and take action to get compensated. Aileen is seeking her family's assistance in figuring out what to do with these documents as she finds the text, concept, and application process to be challenging. She said, "I phoned my niece up last night to ask her what to do, and told her I didn't understand too much of it, so she said she's going to get back to me on it some day."

Although spirituality is an important part of Aileen's life in many different forms, she rejects the conventions that were imposed on her during her youth. She said, "When we were in the residential school, we had to go to church... and we had to read the Bible. Pray." However, "I never went after I got out from there. I didn't go to church again." Therefore, when I asked Aileen about the spiritual text that she reads or writes, she clearly explained to me the uniqueness of her culture: "In our tradition, things are not supposed to be written down ...so if some other person like you, if you need to know about our spirituality you'll have to go there and experience it yourself." Although not considered religious text in its traditional sense, I did find that many of Aileen's literacy practices were linked to spirituality. These included reading of self-help books and writing healing poetry.

This oral tradition was also reflected in the way Aileen gets much of her information. When finding out about her schooling, her son's health or learning about official documentation, she would turn to people and talk to them instead of going to the Internet or flipping through pamphlets or flyers. Similarly, she never reads food labels, but does write down a list to help her recall needed items.

This acutely reflects Aileen's childhood literacy experiences. She said, "Actually I've never seen my parents read anything." The case was similar in her community. "I don't remember anybody reading anything," she said. When I asked her if anybody ever read to her, she replied, "No, just when I was in the classroom." She did eventually recall one instance of writing which involved her father registering their family at a government office when his mother (Aileen's grandmother) married a man who was living in a different reserve. Aileen remembers that when her grandmother "got married into Saddle Lake, [her father] had to go to the Indian Affairs and sign all of [them] into the reserve in Alberta." She said, "Because actually we were all from Saddle Lake, but because [my grandmother] married into another reserve we were all registered over there."

When I prompted her with example, Aileen still had very few memories of texts within her childhood community. She told me that libraries, movie theatres and concert halls were venues frequented only on the rare special occasion during her childhood. She described a concert to which a family friend took her: "It didn't even turn out too well. Because he was drunk. You could hear all these people on top, swearing at him, right? I remember that. I was only thirteen then." So though she recalls instances of text around like programs and pamphlets, she does not associate positive feeling to these events.

Overall, it was difficult for Aileen to remember much of her childhood experiences as they were linked with trauma. She acknowledged this stating, "I think my school years are hard to remember."

### **Charlotte**

I met Charlotte at a local coffee shop. Because she met me after school hours, she brought her daughter Elsie along with her. Elsie was a vision of the typical preteen. She was fashionably dressed and had a trendy hair style that suited her tanned complexion. She seemed confident and comfortable in her surroundings. On the other hand Charlotte seemed rather timid and ill at ease. Elsie asked her mom for some money to buy some iced coffee and then busied herself around the shop for a while drinking her iced drink and fiddling with her cell phone while I interviewed her mom.

I learnt that much of Charlotte's history was similar to Aileen's. Like Aileen, Charlotte was forcefully removed from her family at a very young age and placed in a residential school. She was incarcerated there from the ages of six to eleven. As a result, she found it difficult to answer many of the questions that I was asking about her historical literacy practices. For example, when I asked her what types of text she read during her youth in her home, she replied, "That's going to be difficult because I grew up in a residential school." Like Aileen, she was not willing to acknowledge the residential school as her home, yet was not able to describe any other location as home either. In this regard, both women lacked a sense of home while they were growing up. "Close to the end of the time when they shut down" the residential schools, Charlotte "was taken to Vancouver to see [her] mom," and then began to live with her at that point.

She found it difficult to recall memories before her residential school years as well because of the lack of stability within her family. When I asked her about her earliest childhood experiences, she said, "That's a tough one, because I really feel like I have a block from age six and under." Her explanation extended to show how this turbulent life continued for her into her school years. She said, "It's kind of hard to remember stuff from back there, because it was really an ugly time, let's say, because my mom left us on the reserve there and there was a whole bunch of different abuses that were happening at that time, so I feel like I went on a block from then through school. It had to do with abuses from the teacher and other people, like trying to teach me how to do math and pull me around here to abuse me. I felt like I couldn't learn very much in that environment."

Life after the residential schools continued to be tough on Charlotte. After grade eight, she "started running away," but then was discovered and sent to live with her aunt and uncle. This cycle of not feeling at home continued for her for quite a while. Her past experiences along with her family background eventually led her to turn to alcohol. Even now she struggles with the recovery process. She said, "I'm just really recovering. I don't talk about this, but I come from a long family of alcoholics and addicts and I'm in recovery."

Despite this block in her memory, Charlotte was able to share some of her historical literacy practices with me. She said, "My mom was quite a reader...she read a lot of romance novels...homemaker magazines...knitting books and crocheting books." She remembers her making a shopping list and flipping through flyers. Charlotte picked up on this convention and practices this habit today when she shops. She remembers her mom going to church and reading the bible. She remembers official looking court documents that may have had to do with placement at particular reserves or residential schools. She notes that even today her mother continues to fill out similar forms sent to her by the government in regards to affairs having to do with being aboriginal. Charlotte continued to talk about her mother writing letters, reading books, and filling out forms, but described her as someone who would not take charge on a personal level. Charlotte said of her mother, "She's quite a, what do you call it, not very confident of herself? Because I remember when I was growing up, she wanted me to go to a parent-teacher's conference for my litter sister because she was too afraid to do that."

Even though Charlotte recalls her mother being a letter writer, she does not remember receiving any letters while she was away at the residential schools. She said, "The only thing I remember is, when we got mail or other people got mail, that was our

correspondence, but I don't remember me getting any, but I remember sending some—some letters back home.”

Another literacy practice that Charlotte recalls from her time at the residential schools were the signs that were displayed everywhere, such as “clean your own dishes.” Charlotte noted that this practice made its way to reserve life once the children had become adults. She said, “I notice that around a lot in different native communities, homes that they post these signs up all over...This is all residential school mentality, I think.”

Some of the text Charlotte saw during her childhood came from the reserves where she lived and resembled many of the texts apparent in her community today. She said, “I remember being very small on the reserve, they used to have notice boards. They posted up stuff for some people to have a big sale at this house, whatever...the smaller stores, they would have a list of what they were selling, mostly, like goodie stores, like pop for sale, and chips, and like how much they would cost...There was a restaurant on the reserve; they have like ice cream floats for sale, and...Also, at the ball field they used to have, like hotdogs and hamburgers, all those things they would sell at the hotdog stand.” The community members had posted these instances of text around the reserve.

The texts that are apparent within Charlotte's community today also revolve around signs, announcements and advertisements that community members and businesses have posted. Otherwise, most of Charlotte's present literacy practices revolve around digital texts. Her last job required her to access bank cheques and statements on the bank's computer server. In the process of searching for a new job, she maintains frequent email correspondence with her former employer. She also corresponds with her family and friends through email. Other than email, she also uses MSN messenger to communicate with people and the social network Hi-5 to network and maintain interpersonal communication with a range of friends, colleagues and even strangers. She uses the internet to search for information as well, including finding movie listings and times.

Like Aileen, many of Charlotte's literacy practices as an adult have to do with her healing process. The first two literacy practices she shared with me had to do with her reconciling her life. She said, “well, I journal almost every day...and I do a lot of reading, like self-help books.” Like Aileen, Charlotte is seeking a path to assist her in dealing with her past trauma. Another step she is taking towards this healing is to compile a list of all her relatives and to create a family tree with this information. She said, “I just started corresponding with some family members that I haven't had contact with for a long time, because I'm working on my family tree. So I was going back and forth and, whether they lived [close or far], I was doing it all on paper because I wanted it on paper from them, so I could just put it all together. Like I sent them pieces of paper to write down their addresses and all their children's names and their birthdates.” This served her the dual purpose of healing and of finding family members who had lost contact from one another during the times of the residential schools. Charlotte is also partaking in a program to assist her in her healing path. She said, “I started going to Choices once a week, and we do paperwork, like we do journaling and we do art therapy and so, that was just part of my own thought, to do a family tree in the same kind of way.”

When I asked Charlotte about the religious text she engages in, it once again pointed to her attempts at healing. Although she was greatly exposed to Christianity

during her times at residential schools, she now does not follow that religion or read its literature. Instead, she said, “I’m going through different things, of reading on the medicine wheel? It’s just a circle of things to check on how I’m doing spiritually, physically, mentally, emotionally.”

Like Aileen, Charlotte is motivated to extend her education despite her past negative schooling experiences. For this reason, she has been spending time reading and exploring schooling options. She said, “My idea is to go back to school again...so I figured if I start to read more often, then I could prepare myself to get into study mode. I’ve gone through the catalogues for colleges, just check out the course system.” Part of her motivation is a result of recent positive educational experiences she has had. She said, “recently, in adulthood, I went to a program called Choices that helped me. And there we were doing upgrading and, math, English, the basic. And, and we had to write stories, different times in our lives. And so I did that, and I did a whole lot of different papers on different subjects, and I really communicated well with the teacher there.” Charlotte emphasized the importance of the teacher in her learning process: “She was a very, very good teacher; she said that I should just go back to school instead of trying to find a job. She said I was very good at writing, and well I liked it all...Yep. Because it was just, it was all brand-new to me, again, like I had a great teacher and I was wanting to learn.” This experience made Charlotte realize that much of her negative views toward school actually had to do with the people in charge of her schooling and the circumstances with which she was faced and not at all with her motivation to learn. She said, “I think it was what happened earlier when I got abused that stopped me from wanting to learn anything...It felt that it was wrong and ugly.”

Additionally, Charlotte partly contributes her early apathy toward school to the disassociation that the subject matter had to do with her personal interests and culture. She fears that her daughter may be faced with similar circumstances. She said, “I remember doing, um, history on England...There wasn’t much in the way of learning about my culture at all. We had to learn about England and that’s the biggest thing that I know I remember and, it’s something that I heard today, is that a lot of the native children today, they don’t learn a lot about their culture still, until they get to university.”

### **Conclusions:**

As Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanic (2000) theorized, Aileen and Charlotte had radically different literacy experiences in their past and present lives and these were shaped by the communities in which they lived and the culture in which they partook.

This study also supported the theories of Dewey (1956) and Dyson (1993) that literacy development for children is being held back by the disconnect between school literacy and home/community literacy practices, especially for those whose home literacies are undervalued by the institutions in power. This was precisely the case with both Aileen and Charlotte. Because the government and churches had such low expectations for their academic achievement, they were taught only basic literacy skills. During the time when they were at residential schools, the focus of their education was on religious development and occupational training. Consequently, their school literacy practices led them to future literacy practices quite different than their home/community practices. This also supports Barton’s (1994) views that historical literacy practices were greatly controlled by a dominant power. Today, their current literacy practices continue

to be controlled as well. Just as Charlotte was not able to learn about her culture while at the residential school, her daughter is not being taught about her cultural heritage at her local public school either. Instead, they were both taught about the history and culture of the dominant society. Moreover, practices that were viewed in their past were replicated later in their lives. For example, Charlotte commented on the use of regulatory sign posted around reserves that had their history in residential schools.

Furthermore, Aileen and Charlotte's literacy practices supported the research that literacy development of children is correlated to the literacy practices and behaviors of parents, families and homes (Leichter, 1984; Freeman and Wasserman, 1986). Both participants emulated practices that they recalled in their childhood homes. Charlotte learnt to make a shopping list from her mom and Aileen searches for information orally instead of through print. Both participants made references to the importance of oral literacy in their culture and noted the continuance use of it in their present lives.

Conversely, they picked up literacy skills that they did not use in their past but now needed in order to deal with their past. For example, they both read self-help books and partook in journaling type activities. It is quite possible that they would not be partaking in these practices had they not had the need to heal.

Lastly, Aileen and Charlotte did not pick up many essential literacy skills because they were not exposed to them as a result of being removed from their families. However, other factors in their literacy development cannot be ignored. Aileen, for example, takes much care in assisting in her son's literacy development although she never had this same experience as a child. It is likely that she picked up this practice later in life while taking life skill and mothering courses. Similarly, both women's rejection of religion may have been a result of their negative childhood experiences with it.

The literacies in which Aileen and Charlotte took part in their youth and take part in presently are somewhat different from that of others in their community because of the sociocultural context in which they grew up. This concurs with Street's (1999) findings that different forms of literacy exist in different sociocultural contexts. The interview questions were often not relevant for these two participants of indigenous descent. When asking them what types of things their families read and wrote in their home during childhood, they mentioned that they did not have a home and that they did not live with their families because they were institutionalized in residential schools. The Aboriginal population therefore fits almost as a separate community within the community. Aileen and Charlotte's past and present lives have led them to have experiences quite different than the rest of the community. The information they provided enriched the data considerably by adding another layer to the results. It also made us as researchers (re)realize that our methods to discover textual practices of the community are limited by our own experiences.

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