



## "Just A Simple Little Ditty"

Song In The Literacy Curriculum

by William T. Fagan

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**JOURNEYS  
IN LANGUAGE,  
LEARNING AND CULTURE**

**Helen Woodrow · Carmelita McGrath, Editors**

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## "JUST A SIMPLE LITTLE DITTY" SONG IN THE LITERACY CURRICULUM

*William T. Fagan*

The title of this paper is a line taken from "An Irish Lullaby," a song that has been used by countless mothers to sing their babies to sleep. You may ask what is the connection between singing a baby to sleep and setting up a literacy program? There is a lot in common, and that is a sense of function. Just as a lullaby is sung to have an effect on a child, so also, a literacy program can only be justified if it has an impact on the lives of learners. Adult learners participate in a literacy program or course for many reasons. These can range from the "structural," that is, the literacy course is part of a larger learning package such as an Adult Basic Education program, to the altruistic, that literacy is good for all, to the expressed interests of the learners themselves.

### ***Literacy and Culture***

When adults enrol in a literacy program, they take on a role or identity as student or learner. However, each adult learner also has a number of other identities. Learners may be homemakers, retirees, workers, potential workers, husbands, wives, parents, community volunteers, etc. But learners also have a cultural identity. In this respect they have a self-image in relation to others in the community and also in relation to people and events, past, present and future. One's language, especially oral language, is part of one's cultural identity. How we speak, the words we use, the expressions we share are part of who we are. John Ogbu (1991), a great cultural anthropologist, argues that when language differences occur, they should not be seen as barriers between groups of people, but as "symbols of identity" (p. 527) of a particular group. Therefore, the uniqueness of language in Newfoundland and Labrador should not highlight how we differ from other Canadians; on the contrary it should portray an identity of Newfoundlanders and Labradorians. Language uniqueness usually correlates with other forms of distinction — tradition, values, customs — all of which describe our social reality.

To be literate includes an awareness of one's cultural identity. A big question for literacy instructors is how to integrate literacy instruction with supporting cultural identity and at the same time helping learners understand and use a variety of both oral and written language. Alan Purves (1991) helps by providing a structure or framework for doing this. He believes that literacy and culture are intertwined through three goals that may be set for a literacy program. These goals are:

- (1) Learners will understand their cultural identity, be aware of how their culture impinges upon their existence, and know how to operate successfully with literate tasks within that culture.
- (2) They will be able to transcend or go beyond their immediate culture (that of family, friends, and community) and learn how to meet literacy demands of extended cultures, which include workplace, government, business, and all social, economic, political, ethnic, and racial contexts different from the one in which they grew up.
- (3) Learners may attain self-actualization through literacy in their own cultural identity (for those who choose to stay within that culture), or in extended cultures. By adopting Purves' literacy curriculum framework and goals, cultural identity occupies an important place in a literacy program.

### **Song: A Medium of Cultural Identity and Literacy Development**

Song has many functions. In addition to inducing sleep for babies, song may provide entertainment, raise issues, and provide records of the past. Through song we learn of times past and present, of success and failure, of similarities and differences. I remember a childhood friend from another part of the harbour who, when he visited the area where I lived, would always be asked to sing "his" song, "Hard, Hard Times." While this Newfoundland song was written to reflect the Depression years, people could always relate to it, and so my friend was always popular as a singer, even at the age of ten or eleven. Even now the song may be sung to reflect a different era and perhaps other meanings. People are experiencing hard times today. When we sing the last line of "Hard, Hard Times," "And when it's all over, you're still in the hole," this may not just mean our final resting place, but may also refer to people today who have had to declare bankruptcy or who have borrowed beyond their means.

Song allows learners to step inside a particular social context or reality to take stock of who we are. According to Patrick Courts (1991), this is what literacy should allow us to do. He states, "The word literacy, then, suggests a state of being and a set of capabilities through which the literate individual is able to utilize *the interior world of self to act upon and interact with the exterior structures of the world...*" (p.4). Donald Macedo (1991) also emphasizes this point and argues that "language may confirm or deny the life histories and experiences of the people who use it" (p. ix).

The language of song is a powerful medium for reflecting, introspecting and retrospectively. One of the advantages of song in doing this is that it allows us to experience emotion easily. The rhythm of the words, and the accompanying music (in some cases), set up an emotional space in which we can "feel along" with the words. Unfortunately, many literacy programs are based on workbook type exercises, often with content far removed from the reality of the adult learners. The learners are instructed to read a passage and then answer a series of literal questions:

Where was Mary going? Why was the train late? This kind of content for promoting literacy is sparse in terms of the meaning and emotion it can create within learners. Unfortunately also, in the field of adult literacy instruction, emotion is often divorced from meaning. Questions focus on fact and not on how the readers feel or react to what is read.<sup>1</sup> Song is ideally suited for integrating meaning and emotion. The content and the rhythm lend themselves to fostering identity and feeling in the listener. Furthermore, song usually occurs within a social gathering so it sets up a special kind of relationship between participants — a relationship in which the participants can empathize with one another. There is a group as well as an individual identity.

Newfoundland and Labrador culture is rich in song. Song has been and is integral to this culture. While people may have been limited in having voice through print because of limited literacy skills, they were never deprived from having voice through song. Literacy programs must support voice as well as cultural identity. Song gives learners a voice to express issues that affect their social existence and should form an important point for discussion in literacy programs. This kind of activity is consistent with Purves' first goal of a literacy curriculum.

Consider two recent songs, "Saltwater Joys" (Buddy Wasiname and the Other Fellers) and "Will They Lie There Evermore?" (The Irish Descendants). Can a person find a better starting point in giving voice to a decision facing many Newfoundlanders and Labradorians today — that of staying or leaving — as expressed in "Saltwater Joys?" Each line or phrase of this song may be taken as a focus for sharing images, expressing emotion, and making decisions. The song can be sung, listened to, enjoyed, reflected upon, as it affects our lives or those close to us. Likewise, "Will They Lie There Evermore?" forces us to consider our social reality, a reality encompassing economics, family, politics, and decision. Will our fishing boats lie for evermore hauled upon on the shore? What will become of our livelihood and of ourselves? This song, unlike "Saltwater

Joys," does not suggest closure or solution, but forces the listeners (learners) to find their own resolution, or to suspend decision, to linger, or merely to dream.

### ***A Methodology of Song***

There is no intention to suggest that song become a literacy curriculum. Song is intended as one form of language within a literacy curriculum to help learners become aware of and celebrate cultural identity and to have voice. Song should be integrated with many other language experiences. When song is used as part of a literacy curriculum, it is not just about singing. There is a difference between the function of song in a literacy class and in a pub, although there are many similarities. In a literacy class, song is more than an oral form; it is related to the language of print, since print or written language forms the basis of literacy.

If you wish to incorporate song into a literacy curriculum to foster both cultural identity and literacy development, the following framework will help. This is an abbreviated form of methodology using song that may be found in *A Basic Culture Critical Literacy Program* (Fagan, 1997).

#### *1. Introduce the Song and Topic*

Write the title of the song on the board/chart.

"What comes to your mind when you hear — ?"

Play a recording of the song.

#### *2. Identifying an Issue/Concern*

"Is there a concern here?"

"What is the nature of this concern?"

#### *3. Examining Both Sides of the Issue*

"Is there another side to this concern?"

"Would different people have different views about it?"

#### *4. Determining Author-Audience Relationships*

"Why do you think the composer/author wrote this song?"

"What effect do you think the composer/author wanted to create?"

#### *5. Giving Feedback*

Provide positive feedback in response to the learners' participation.

#### *6. Listening and Reading*

Hand out copies of the printed words of the song.

Play the song again, and have learners follow along with the text.

#### *7. Response: Writing*

"What is your reaction as you listen to this issue! concern?"

"How could you express your reaction in writing?"

#### *8. Response: Other Action*

This step would be optional depending on the nature of the issue, its currency, impact, etc., and the writing activity above.

"What can you do about this issue?"

(Action could range from expressing one's views on a radio talk show, to organizing a petition, to seeking more information, to writing another song.)

9. *Engaging in Word Study (for those at the lower literacy levels)*

"From the top of your head, tell me which words were important to you in talking about (name the issue)." (Depending on the structure of the words, various word structure similarities, such as sound-symbol relationships, common word parts or endings, may be pointed out.) Ask the learners if they have a favourite word, or line from the song. Write this on the board and talk about the word meanings, and any word structure commonalities.

10. *Revisiting the Song/Issue*

Have copies of the song (cassette, CD) available so that learners may listen to them at a later time.

**Conclusion**

There is nothing simple or little about a ditty (song). Song is about culture, identity and function. It is an ideal medium for literacy development, for to ignore our culture in developing literacy expertise is to exclude what literacy is all about. Literacy is about having a cultural identity, about having voice, about using feeling and emotion in interpretation and expression, about using language for all these purposes. It is about memories for reflection and retrospection. And so is song!

Oft in dreams I wander  
To that cot again,  
I feel her arms a-hugging me  
As when she held me then.  
Just a simple little ditty  
In her good old Irish way  
And I'd give the world  
If she could sing  
That song to me today!

**Notes**

<sup>1</sup>Literacy programs which use "good" literature to which learners can relate as the basis for instruction are more suited to arousing emotion as part of meaning than are workbook type materials.

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