MULTICULTURALISM IN THE ESL BUREAUCRACY

Alas, Furansu is a writer living in Toronto.

Further Reading

by Jeremy Stolow

I have always thought I knew what multiculturalism meant. After all, I'm supposed to be living it, aren't I? I'm a Jewish anglophone and my 'co' is a Catholic francophone. I enjoy Indian food, I listen to African music and I wear South American sweaters. I've got friends from Argentina, Haiti, Hong Kong, St. Lucia, Italy, Ghana and Germany. 'Being' multicultural feels good.

OKAY, AND
BUT MAYBE YOU
CAN MAKE UP
THE TIME ON
SATURDAY.

HERE INDEED ARE SYMBOLS OF CANADA'S
GLORIOUS PAST...

WHOSE HISTORY?

Excursions
But what is this word supposed to refer to? Those who ‘practice’ or engage in a national dialogue prefer to refer to them as the ‘practitioners’ of each other’s cultures, languages, heritages, and symbols and images of each other’s cultures.

We often confuse the intricacies and implications of living in such a multicultural society as being defined as and through a dialogue about its meaning. As citizens and we as citizens, we assume that we have the power to propose—let us impose—our ideas and dreams about the kind of society we live in, and the kind of society it could be. So that as a society, there must be more to multiculturalism than that we believe it is.

Whatever the pleasures we might generate by sharing such a historic moment, we cannot escape the fact that our colloquial sense of the word is clouded by a maze of institutional definitions: government statistics, race relations guidelines, policy statements for newcomer services, and so on. This medios a pause for consideration if only because there is no way to understand our national dialogue without seeing the ways in which its very words are being put to use by our government bureaucracies today.

Working as an instructor of English as a Second Language (ESL) for the Ontario Ministry of Citizenship and Culture (OMCC) over the past few years has led me to see the definition of multiculturalism as it is found in government services which come into direct contact with a diverse range of communities. ESL instructors are agents of the Canadian government bureaucracy. That is, ESL instructors act as agents of the government bureaucracy in the sense that they are directly accountable for the provision of ESL services. The ESL instructor is thus supposed to share with the student (read: potential citizen) an examination of the practical significance of assimilation as it pertains to the ordinary everyday life practices of ordinary people. Lesson number one: our society is a multicultural mosaic in which everyone is tolerant of others’ practices and who are maintained within the context of this peaceful co-existence.

The ESL instructor has to be able to demonstrate to the student (read: potential citizen) an examination of the practical significance of assimilation as it pertains to the ordinary everyday life practices of ordinary people. Lesson number one: our society is a multicultural mosaic in which everyone is tolerant of others’ practices and who are maintained within the context of this peaceful co-existence.

However well intentioned we may be, when we seek to "inform" immigrants and refugees about life in Canada, we promote a distorted image and thus involve ourselves in a process of indoctrination as to how we ought to live. For it is one thing to spell out one’s ideas about what makes for a good society in the context of a dialogue, it is quite another to present these ideas to people not previously exposed to the heritage and linguistic baggage to decide for themselves what Canada is like, and hence what being a Canadian might mean. Despite the disclaimers that pepper all the books—"that is not a single way to define being Canadian for all people" (even in its iconography of play in most ESL material)—I have come across regarding both the image of the good life in Canada and the corresponding image of the "good Canadian." The good newcomer-Canadian not only works hard (read: doesn’t stay on welfare for too long) and obeys the laws about behaving in public (read: doesn’t drink or urinate in public), but also celebrates the diversity of Canadian heritages (read: learns to conceal racism the way all other Canadians do). What is of interest to me here is that ESL instructors—and with them, all the various agents of government settlement services—have not always operated with such directness in mind. In fact, it doesn’t take a historian of Canadian immigration policy to know that there was a time when the issue of how newcomers were to assimilate into Canadian society was articulated quite differently. Arriving at the shores of a nation where "concerns about potential migration risks"—enemy aliens, strike leaders, religious pariahs, the yellow peril—were openly voiced, the immigrant’s experience of the government was at best that of an unsympathetic host. Often, this meant falling gory to those (read: sweatshop owners and their friends) eager to take advantage of a cheap labour force unable to speak the dominant language and ignorant of the law.

Canadians governments of the past held little interest in whether immigrants “sink or swim,” and certainly didn’t bother to entertain considerations of cultural assimilation and integration with respect to the newcomer. By contrast, the governments of today ensure us that they are concerned about settling immigrants and refugees, and more specifically, that they understand it to be their responsibility to help newcomers assimilate into our multicultural society.

In other words, even if bureaucracies such as Employment and Immigration, Citizenship and Culture, the boards of education and Metro Toronto still seem to harbour “cold shoulder” policies, what has become an issue now is the question of how newcomers are supposed to understand themselves in relation to their new host.

If the concrete, material terms in which newcomers to Canada are expected to assimilate into our society have not changed, there has been a decisive shift in concern about how smoothly and how effectively this process of assimilation is being carried out, and in tandem with this, a growing realization of the government services responsible for keeping this process from stalling off course. Consider the redefinition of the role of the ESL instructor in Toronto: I began teaching ESL in Toronto for the TES when teachers were hired according to the exigencies of demand rather than their merit or their conformity with the aspirations of a profession. When the questions raised at my job interview indicated that my standards had begun to take interest in what kind of people should be teaching ESL, this was something that I was not prepared for. Most of us who were hired a couple years before me found that only identifiable prerequisites for working as an ESL teacher were a ‘good command of English grammar and clear diction.’ The ESL instructors today, however, are expected to articulate and reflect in their own advancement as professionals through a systematic procedure of mutual surveillance, and to express their professional aspirations, among which figures the promotion of multiculturalism, in processes...
ce which have been borrowed from managerial training courses. What is of significance here is that ESL instructors have come to an understanding of the concept of language learning but also of classroom behavior — the "prole-
ticate" and the "instructor," the "speech act" and all the anticipated ques-
tions and concerns of the newcomer — everything from the subtle neophytes regale with "immigrant success stories" to the profanity-laced ranting of the "car- rortettes," would not allow him to back into the classroom after he had been maligned unless he firstbrushed his teeth and washed his hands. Another story reports a teacher who locks the door of his classroom before he begins class so that, as he puts it, "immigrants can't ask us in," despite his knowing that some of his students come ready to class or after a long day of cleaning toilets at the Eaton Centre, working in sweatshops, or hanging around the welfare office only to be told by their teachers to go back. One of our "students" really taken into consideration when another instructor proposed her classes to measuring the Canadian national culture without its students being able to understand most of the lyrics.

Such stories could fill volumes: OMCC-sponsored Band analyse; contests, lessons about doing things differently, teachers' Day poetry readings about winning in public, aesthetic "self-worthness" of the lyrics. Nothing is too trivial to be considered as the basis for something that newcomers should worry about, what they should find funny, what to buy, how to behave. Nothing is left untouched by the "freedom" of the newcomer for her/his public life in our "multicultural society." This institutionalized response to the inter-and multicultural production of life is essentially a "bureaucratic" sedentary-our: It is case which seeks to claim responsibility for the wel-
ter of the quotidian experiences of contemporary Canadian society.

This notion of responsibility merits further thought. For it we governments agent, politicians, lobby group mem-
ers, cope with the "citizen" wish to say we are "responsible" for multiculturalism, then we are saying that we have power over it, that we wish to determine it, to manage it, to legislate it. With this notion, multiculturalism comes to be seen as a situation in need of a definition: a best of social solutions that "must be controlled." But what does it mean to have power over things that others are doing? What is it that happens in the ESL classroom, in multiculturalism policy, there would be racism and ethnic conflict? I'd like you to hear that argument before. But should any proposal for syncretism of supposedly "warring ethnic cultures" be left to stand above critical examination? If multiculturalism is supposed to bring us together, what kind of a 'together' are we involving?

One might be tempted to ask what there really is in such a multicultural society? The concept of multiculturalism, perhaps even the very word "culture" in the plural (as it use talk about discrete, bounded cultural social identity adhering to the "other"), is hardly a concept that preoccupied with "culture" and its production and reproduction. But however we might to tackle this problem, it seems that within the framework of "bureaucracies" these questions have been addressed by construct multiculturalism as a Canadian incorporation of Faponiere's utterly con-

structured state of affairs where all cultures are "blended together" and homogenized. It is precisely at this point that the notion of multicultural society requires examination. The term "culture-at-large" is as much determined by "culture-at-large" (shopping, reading The Sun, swapping talking stories, lavendering at the crack) as by the "other" as by the abandons that sociologists speak about. Given this, perhaps there is no reason for us to connect with "society-at-large" without at some stage purg-
not a myth about their coherent and bounded identity, if not a misfortune.

The more interesting question, it seems to me, is one of how the instrumentalist mentality — part port and punch with the formation of the model of a "successful newcomer" — which at one time signaled the presence of Big Brother bureaucracy comes to include the numerous dis-
cursive positions in the social space I have been trying to characterize, just as it inhabits, in another slot, other social roles which are up-

In the hands of the bureaucrats, the word multicultural- racem action. In this case those propagat-
ed by the Canadian mobile classes of which I look many other ESL teachers are engaged is

To be considered as the basis for something that newcomers

should worry about, what they should find funny, what to buy, how
to behave. Nothing is left untouched by the "freedom" of the
newcomer for her/his public life in our "multicultural society."

This institutionalized response to the inter-and multicultural
production of life is essentially a "bureaucratic" sedentary-our;
it is case which seeks to claim responsibility for the wel-
ter of the quotidian experiences of contemporary Canadian society.

Of course, one would do well by asking whether instructors actually bother to read the books that the bureau-
crats require them to read or whether they are just "telling stories" in the
classroom in any way resembles what is spelled out in these official
guidelines. The obvious answer is: neither. "What happens in the ESL classroom, running from the strictest adherence to the letter of OMCC and

The ESL discourse I have involved here has not
"replaced" the instructor; but it has transformed the context in which the ESL program, or have the massive transformative processes in the institutional structures which define ESL instruction in general.

My point has not been so much to sketch the con-
tours of a balistic, Big-Brother styled bureaucratic that
suits itself the task of controlling the few cubic centimeters
wherein to the status quo might permis originate.

Instrumentalism or the absence of the instrumentalist is not as much determined by "culture-at-large" (shopping, reading The Sun, swapping talking stories, lavendering at the crack) as by the "other" as by the abandons that sociologists speak about. Given this, perhaps there is no reason for us to connect with "society-at-large" without at some stage purg-
not a myth about their coherent and bounded identity, if not a misfortune.

The more interesting question, it seems to me, is one of how the instrumentalist mentality — part port and punch with the formation of the model of a "successful newcomer" — which at one time signaled the presence of Big Brother bureaucracy comes to include the numerous dis-
cursive positions in the social space I have been trying to characterize, just as it inhabits, in another slot, other social roles which are up-

In the hands of the bureaucrats, the word multicultural- racem action. In this case those propagat-
ed by the Canadian mobile classes of which I look many other ESL teachers are engaged is