Harnessing the courage to talk openly

In describing her collage, Olivia spoke confidently and with pride about how much she knew about herself and her cultural roots. She saw herself as having deep layers and so created a double-sided collage that represented both her Canadian and Francophone culture. Her inquiry topic began with an exploration of “the stories people share in their teaching that they don’t always consciously mean to.” Echoing her collage, Olivia wrote about how teachers convey to their students subconscious feelings and intuitions that represent cultural beliefs. In particular, she saw herself and other French Immersion (FI) teachers as being unique in how they shared the essence of their being in the classroom, saying they hold the privilege of being able to, “breathe a different worldview into a space and model a sense of pride.”

While deeply connected to her personal story, Olivia wanted to know more about how Francophone teachers weave their cultural stories into their practice. She began by interviewing FI teachers and students around many questions: How do FI teachers teach their culture in a language classroom? How will I tell my story and teach my culture? Is culture able to be taught? Can teaching a language mean teaching a story? Will students connect more to FI teachers who share their culture? She found the interview process to be useful in that the diversity of answers helped her understand her own positioning more fully. In addition, the conversations generated through her interviews validated many of the feelings she had around her topic. At the same time the interviews could be difficult because what she was trying to understand was in many ways intangible. To deal with this she let those questions be, and focused more on what could be described. Through the interviews, Olivia began to develop thinking friend relationships with new colleagues that she believed would continue on after this project.

At some point in the process two new and distinct questions emerged beyond her initial queries. First, she began “trying to figure out how a constructive Francophone community emerges in a school and nurtures itself to remain alive and to complete the teachers who comprise it.” Alongside of this, Olivia began to voice concerns about some of the “deep nagging questions” and tensions she had been feeling from her peers over the past 16 months of her teacher education program:

I am currently facing resentment and anger...for dedicating myself to FI. It is incredibly difficult to be one of the few people with French language skills in a province which is recruiting teachers in this area and not in English... I feel fortunate, but I also feel that I cannot share any happiness or success with any members of my cohort.

Perhaps it was because of these tensions that Olivia made a point to maintain non-political and criticism free dialogue with her interviewees.

One of the major highlights of her inquiry had to do with Olivia “harnessing the courage to talk openly” about her culture, particularly with other teachers of Quebec
heritage. In the mentoring sessions, she also spoke about being anxious around sharing her inquiry with her peers. When the day came, she stepped up bravely, finding it empowered her and “allowed [her] to believe in [her] thoughts, feelings, interpretations, ideas, determination, flexibility and honesty.” She wrote in her final summary that she was learning to marry the two sides of her collage “by addressing the needs of [her] Quebec side with the communities [she] evolves in throughout the BC context.”