

Storytelling to Teach Cultural Awareness:
The Right Story at the Right Time

Mary McCullum Baldasaro, EdD
Walden University

Nancy Maldonado, PhD
Walden University

Beate Baltes, EdD
Walden University

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Abstract

Stories contain the wisdom of the world, teaching cultural values. Story builds community, celebrates cultural diversity, and preserves cultural identity. Where truth has been suppressed, story is an instrument of epiphany; story builds literacy skills and develops metaphorical understanding. A storytelling center in Ontario, Canada, had been a cultural institution for 23 years and developed the art and craft of storytelling in the members of its storytelling guild. When the center faced permanent closure, members were devastated. The conceptual underpinnings for this research study were narrative theory, place theory, and knowledge communities. Narrative theory postulates that storytelling is a universal experience; place theory incorporates sense of place, place attachment, and place identity. In knowledge communities, knowledge is constructed through narrative and shared practice. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore member perceptions of story, storytelling, and leadership and to investigate the moment of this lived experience using interviews and focus groups. Findings indicated that story strengthens both content retention and language acquisition. These findings led to the development of project focused on story-centered lessons for teachers.

Introduction to the Project

The project evolved from the study discussed above. Stories are of primary significance in First Nation, Métis, and Inuit (FNMI) cultures. The stories have multiple dimensions, teaching as they do the history, the culture, the values, the roles of men and women, the importance of names, and traditions. Such stories were largely misunderstood by the dominant western culture

and trivialized as *legend* rather than *Legend*. Other stories, such as those of residential school experience, or starvation, were long disregarded and have only come to have credence more recently as they are corroborated by government documents (Weber, 2013; The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2012). These stories comprise an untold or at least unheard history that haunts. One of the notions citizens cling to as a culture in Canada is of FNMI as *the other* and one of the ways this has been accomplished is by sequestering FNMI peoples on reserves that are, for the most part, far from our understood civilization. These reserves are only the smallest fraction of the lands FNMI peoples once called home, lost through manipulation and un-honored treaty, taken, not given, rarely recompensed. The events that led to the loss of FNMI land are the focus of the project, the story activity kit, designed to create memory affectively through experience.

Description of the Project/Activity

This activity is a full-participation, feet-on, story activity that teaches the loss of First Nations lands through a series of historical events and treaties. The activity was developed by Kairos Canada (2013), an interfaith group that has given full permission, even encouragement, to use and adapt the exercise. The lead researcher experienced the Blanket Exercise herself, and from the feedback of other participants, realized that minor adaptations would make the activity even more effective and memorable. The creation of an all-inclusive kit would make the story activity accessible to multiple schools, teachers, and students. The floor of the classroom or presentation room would be spread with blankets (or towels) that would touch each other. The whole center area would be covered. Participants would then be invited to remove their shoes and stand on the covered area. This would be explained to be the northern part of Turtle Island (as North America is known in some Aboriginal traditions). Maps indicate the various groups

who lived and used the land before the arrival of the Europeans. Participants would then be assigned roles of FNMI, European, or Narrator. There are a series of colored cards that will later determine the fate of individual FNMI participants, and a series of descriptive statements that outline historical events and decisions that were undertaken that resulted in the loss of the land. As land is lost, towels should be removed, and the FNMI participants will be required to join others on their “land.” Certain proclamations will result in some of the towels being folded in half or even into quarters. When positive activities are undertaken, towels may be unfolded (a bit) to show signs of hope. Through this interactive story activity, participants are anticipated to come to a greater and more sympathetic understanding of the enormous losses to FNMI peoples, and see how little of their land is left to them as reserves.

At the end of the exercise, participants will sit cross-legged in a circle around the once-blanketed area and reflect on the experience. Following one of many diverse FNMI traditions, a talking feather will be passed from participant to participant. Only the person holding the feather will be permitted to speak at any given time. Each participant will have an opportunity to hold the talking feather and so to speak.

Goals and the Plan

The goals of the Blanket Exercise are to create greater awareness, respect, and recognition of FNMI culture through the experience of the story. Stories are what human beings remember, how they remember (Haven, 2007). Ideally, the Blanket Exercise would provide a gateway to learning by providing an experiential context that is keenly remembered. As a result, teachers and students alike will read more deeply into the text as they follow the curriculum. The Blanket Exercise supports initiatives and objectives of the *Ontario First Nation, Métis and Inuit Policy Framework* from the Aboriginal Education Office at the Ministry of Education (2007)

acknowledging a troubled past, and gently allowing for self-identification in a safe context, should that occur.

The kit to be used for the Blanket Exercise includes towels obtained through a grant from a teachers' union, Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association (OECTA), under the Justice and Peace initiative. In cooperation with the FNMI consultant, the Religion and Family Life consultant, and the itinerant teacher of the gifted, four different groups will experience the Blanket Exercise. The kit will later be catalogued for the resource center, along with very clear instructions for its use so that teachers who have participated in the professional development would be able to use the kit with the classes at their own schools. Also some of the identified gifted students may be invited to assist in the delivery and pre-teach the format and content at the school site.

Rationale

It is important to tell the right story at the right time. In July of 2013, Weber reported that a researcher had discovered unpublished studies from the 1940s that were conducted on First Nations children (called Indians at that time and in those studies). Canadians learned of government documents that described government-run experiments that involved more than 1,300 Aboriginal persons, the majority children in residential schools. When visiting officials discovered that these people were already hungry, dependent, and isolated, they determined that they would make ideal subjects for studies on nutritional theory. The experiments were conducted in several ways:

- By providing vitamins to some and not to others
- By reducing milk allotments for some and not for others to establish a “baseline”

- By providing a special enriched flour that could not legally be sold because of food adulteration laws to some and not to others

Through the years, and indeed to the present time, too many First Nations persons have suffered from stereotyping. Seeing them demoralized, instead of recognizing that the “shiftlessness, indolence, improvidence and inertia” by which they were characterized by the original researchers was a result of deprivation, these qualities were attributed them as characteristics of a population (Weber, July 16, 2013, para. 7). They were discounted, and the reality of their hopeless dispiritedness was used to justify the continued discounting of their dignity and personhood.

Negative stereotypes are all too common in Canadian culture. Sometimes they are subtle and hard to address. The injustice done and the cover-ups and denials that have been perpetuated must stop. The real history of FNMI has never been included in Canadian history books. Although as a result of the work of the Truth and Justice Commission of Canada (2012), stories of residential school experience are finally being told and acknowledged, many current students will never learn the truth in an educational setting, and few will stir themselves to explore the issues independently. It is time for educators to take the lead and begin to broach the painful past that so negatively affects the present and the future for FNMI peoples in the form of poverty, substance abuse, child and spousal abuse, unemployment, and under-education (Daschuk, 2013; Weber, 2013). As Amber indicated, it is the responsibility of a storyteller to tell the right story at the right time.

The use of storytelling results in greater retention of awareness that Canada’s unfortunate treatment of FNMI peoples has been largely omitted or glossed over in history texts. It would not be an exaggeration to describe most non-Aboriginal Canadians as unaware when it comes to the

topic of FNMI history and topics. Canadians and others have only recently become aware of the starvation experiments that took place at some of the residential schools. The Government of Canada has been reluctant to fully acknowledge the atrocities that were perpetrated against FNMI populations, atrocities so abhorrent that there is an initiative to have these wrongs labeled as genocide (Galloway, 2013). Genocide was defined by the United Nations (as cited in Galloway, 2013) as:

the intent to destroy a national, ethnic, racial or religious group through any of a number of means including killing its members, causing them serious mental or physical harm, subjecting them to unsustainable living conditions, preventing births of their children, and forcibly transferring their children to another group. (para. 9)

This activity would respect and follow the *Ontario First Nation, Métis and Inuit Policy Framework* from the Aboriginal Education Office at the Ministry of Education (2007). There is currently an initiative by the Ministry of Education that has pressed on down to the school board level to address the neglect of this subject (Mcneely, R. personal communication, October 21, 2013). As such, the Blanket Exercise would not only make a strong and lasting impression, but also serve to move awareness in the right direction. More text-centered ways of covering the subject have typically been merely cursory, except in the instances where extremely knowledgeable or committed educators have taken a more dedicated approach (Mcneely, R. personal communication, October 21, 2013). Taking a storytelling approach to the material is simply using a traditional model. The experiential component is equally authentic, because learning by doing is also a traditional way of learning in Aboriginal culture.

Story in the Story

When the historical truth, told as usual from the perspective of the victors, neglected to mention the less savory aspects of FNMI participation in Canada's history, some of the stories were nonetheless told orally, usually within families. These stories signaled that part of Canada's past remained to be told. As these stories of lived experience came to light, more and more pressure, media coverage, and even public outcry led to the admission that treaties had been broken, that land on which cities and towns were built was never fully ceded from First Nations peoples (Union of BC Indian Chiefs, 2013). Land ownership is such a controversial subject that it is possible that its near neglect in education is because of the fear of ruffling feathers and an equal part is lack of knowledge on the part of educators. It is highly appropriate to convey through a story experience an aspect of the history of a culture whose history has always been expressed in the oral tradition through story.

Review of the Literature

The Okanagan storyteller Jeannette Armstrong (as cited in King, 2003) stated the following: "The truth about stories is that's all we are."

Through my language I understand I am being spoken to, I'm not the one speaking. The words are coming from many tongues and mouths of Okanagan people and the land around them. I am a listener to the language's stories, and when my words form I am merely retelling the same stories in different patterns. (p. 2)

For once a story is told, it cannot be called back. Once told, it is loose in the world. Listeners "catch the words as they are thrown" (Tsethlikai & Rogoff, 2013, p. 568). King (2003) concurred by stating, "So you have to be careful with the stories you tell. And you have to watch out for the

stories that you are told” (p. 10). Haven (2007) expressed similar conviction concerning the primacy of stories:

People are eager for stories. Not dissertations. Not lectures. Not informative essays. For stories. No one lines up outside the library to be the first to check out the latest doctoral dissertations. No, it's stories we crave, even though the dissertation may well have more beneficial information and more lasting value for our lives. Such expository narrative feels like bitter medicine. Stories feel like candy. (p. 8)

A Right Time and Place

A storyteller has the responsibility to tell the right stories at the right time and in the right place. This requires that the storyteller have a significant repertoire of stories, and presumably many of the key stories of the culture, or at least stories with universal themes, and also that the storyteller be proficient in the telling that the stories may have the necessary impact. Implicit is the requirement that the storyteller be sufficiently intuitive or attuned to the situation to know what is appropriate. Dion (2004) identified dual responsibilities: that of the listener to seek and find meaning in the story, and that of the teller to tell an appropriate story for the circumstances and the listeners. Ojibway Storyteller (2005) explained that Traditional First Nations storytellers were required to know the teachings of their own peoples and others and to share the wisdom and the words of the past with the present generation for the future. The history had been passed down orally, and before it ever was written down, the past and the traditional teachings had been learned word for word. The responsibility of the storytellers was to pass on the understanding they carried in their hearts and in their spirits in words that would inspire the next generations, the future chiefs and leaders, “the future clan mothers, and the future mothers and fathers” (para. 3). In the far too numerous situations where generation after generation was removed from their

family and village and culture and sent away to residential schools with the express purpose that the institutions would “kill the Indian in the child” (Campbell, 2013), such traditional teachings were not passed on. The stories were not told at the right time; the stories were not told at all.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2012) explicitly stated in their report *They Came for the Children*: “This is a story of loss. Residential schools disrupted families and communities. They prevented elders from teaching children long-valued cultural and spiritual traditions and practices. They helped kill languages” (p. 1). The loss is all the more critical because in many cases, the Aboriginal languages and dialects had not yet been codified. When the oral language was lost, the knowledge was lost along with it. The book describes the residential school experience and cites numerous FNMI individuals who share their lived experience.

King (2003) credits Okri, a Nigerian storyteller with having said:

In a fractured age, when cynicism is god, here is a possible heresy: we live by stories, we also live in them. One way or another we are living the stories planted in us early or along the way, or we are also living the stories we planted—knowingly or unknowingly—in ourselves. We live stories that either give our lives meaning or negate it with meaninglessness. If we change the stories we live by, quite possibly we change our lives. (p. 153)

Guerilla storytelling is the way some describe necessary storytelling. Once again, guerilla storytelling requires that the teller have a somewhat extensive repertoire, and that it is most accessible, ready to tell at a moment’s notice, again suggesting that a certain amount of storyteller competence is required. Clarkson (2004) described a situation in which he was invited to tell stories to a government sponsored group (CASCADE). His response to offer his pro bono

services underlines the reason a storyteller tells stories in the first place: a storyteller believes in the power of story to heal the world. The coordinator was an experienced story listener who valued storytelling and story. The teller was an experienced storyteller with an extensive repertoire of traditional folktales and legends, as well as original work. While Clarkson (2004) did not use the word “magical,” he strongly implied that this was a serendipitous experience of being exactly where he was meant to be and telling the right story at the right time.

Educating through Storytelling

In Western thinking, direct address is used to communicate important ideas in education, important concepts that must be learned. Educators learn to be explicit. The bulleting function on our computers is well-used as we present key ideas in point form, leaving no doubt as to the main concepts. In Aboriginal experience, stories are more incidental, and the listeners, if their families still keep some of the old ways, or participate in some of their own cultural activities are more greatly attuned to environmental learning.

Storytelling is used to teach children who they are, where they are from, what their elders know about the world and how to behave in it. Storytelling is one of the primary means for teaching children about appropriate Tohono O’odham behavior, as many stories warn children about the consequences of misbehavior and the benefits of behaving appropriately. (Tsethlikai & Rogoff, 2013, p.570)

Tsethlikai and Rogoff (2013) described the benefits of “learning through attentive involvement and contribution to family and community events” (p. 575). They found that children who participated in traditional practices, which included listening to traditional oral stories and teachings had better recall for a story that was told orally, but indirectly. This recall is not attributed simply to the fact that these children might be considered to be experienced listeners

but also to the fact that recent research seems to indicate that reading comprehension is enhanced by oral comprehension skills, as are oral and written expression (Berninger & Abbott, 2010). Experienced listeners would be anticipated to benefit most from learning through story, and hearing a story told by a skilled storyteller also enhances the experience, and leads to greater comprehension, impact, and ultimately, retention.

In her recent study with German Language Learners in Berlin, Germany, Wardetzky (2007) found that listening to stories told by trained storytellers for one hour each week over the course of a school year significantly improved students' fluency in the target language, but also enriched their vocabulary and their comprehension exponentially. Wardetzky (2007) also stressed the importance of trained storytellers for the comprehension and language acquisition benefits described in the research. Furthermore, she indicated that the students involved in the project became experienced listeners over the course of the study, and had not been at all experienced at the onset. The benefits occurred as students became more experienced listeners. Gardner-Neblett, Pungello, and Iruka (2012), in their study of African American children determined that because there was a preference for the spoken word, this could be used to enhance the development of reading comprehension skills with that group it might be possible to use this preference to advantage to develop reading comprehension skills.

Gottshall (2013) did not pretend that incantations such as "Once upon a time..." alone would suffice to ensure that story worked its magic. He too remarked on the necessity for there to be skilled tellers: "If the storyteller is skilled..." (p. 17). He also suggested that the listeners should be somewhat experienced because he described the way that they fill in the details: "When we experience a story, minds are churning, working hard" (p. 17). He commented on the way that in telling our stories to each other, we effectively narrate our lives in turning events that

have taken place, and perspectives about those events, into narratives. Similarly, Schank and Berman (2006) described the human function of telling stories to each other and to ourselves, telling tales about the events of the day in our conversations and learning from the telling as learning from narrating our lives. Others learn from these narrations as well if they are told at an opportune moment, becoming the right story at the right time. Gottschall (2013) noted the same phenomenon. Many people are aware of the fact that they have narrated their own lives beginning in childhood when story is key to the life. Gottschalk (2013) discussed this perspective: “Story is so central to the lives of young children that it comes close to defining their existence” (p. 18).

Gottschall went on to state that “The human imperative to make and consume stories runs even more deeply than literature, dreams, and fantasy. We are soaked to the bone in story” (p. 19). Some of these stories will lead to the ultimate revelation of historical truths. Daschuk (2013) noted that when stories of sexual and physical abuse of First Nations children at residential schools were mentioned 20 years ago, some scholars suggested that the stories be taken with a grain of salt, unbelieving, just as others did, that the stories of near-starvation and children who died in those places and whose deaths were never explained to their parents, were highly exaggerated. When students and others read histories that stated benignly: “the land was prepared for settlement,” it occurred to none that this meant an ethnic cleansing—that food was denied, despite treaty agreements that included food aid. Until this present day, many Canadians have discounted “reports of terrible housing conditions on reserves, unsafe drinking water, dismal educational outcomes, and ...prison populations disproportionately stacked with Aboriginal inmates” (Daschuk, 2013, para. 8). We did not listen to the stories.

Just as the master storytellers from the Storytellers' Guild (and beyond) all include folktales in their repertoires, and understand their essential nature in the storytelling, so too Aboriginal teachers employ archetypes. These are paramount in the implicit teaching of cultural values, including "oral tradition, language, history, institutions, norms and values, territory, environment and ecology" (Atleo, 2009, p. 455). Atleo (2009) identified the seven principles of storywork from the Coast Salish First Nations Elders as "reverence, respect, responsibility, reciprocity, wholism, interrelatedness and synergy" (p. 455). Atleo used metaphoric mapping to examine the implicit themes in an Aboriginal tale as explored by these elders who explained to her that the function of grandparents, includes their knowledge, their guidance, and their example of how to conduct themselves. Knowledge tended to be gender-specific and not all grandparents or elders were knowledgeable about all things or even the same things. An understanding of the role of grandparents in the culture underlines the calamity of residential schools that resulted in the loss of grandparent wisdom and experience.

Roles and Responsibilities of Students and Others

The lead researcher has participated in the Blanket Exercise and is an experienced storyteller. She will lead the activity several times:

- For the teachers at the local school (with the intent that this would serve as an introduction to their respective First Nations curriculum considerations)
- For the students in Grades 4 through 8 at the local school
- For the teacher members of the Pastoral Team (professional development)
- For the FNMI representative from other WCDSB schools (professional development) with the intent that they would then use the kit to lead the Blanket Exercise at their own schools

Project/Activity Evaluation

The final part of the Blanket Exercise occurs when participants sit cross-legged in a circle around the northern half of Turtle Island (the part of North America that is politically known as Canada). A talking feather is passed from person to person. Only the person who is holding the feather is permitted to speak, but each participant would have a turn to say something that he or she thought or learned or felt. There will be a brief pre- and post-exercise survey for feedback and evaluation. This will focus on the participants' assessment of how much they think they knew coming into the exercise, how much they think they know coming out of the exercise, and to what extent they believe that they will remember the extent of the loss of FNMI land because of the activity. This will also ask whether participants think they could have learned and understood more from reading about the loss in a text.

Implications for Social Change

Storytelling is a powerful form of teaching (Fawcett & Fawcett, 2011). At the very least, participants will come away from experiencing the Blanket Exercise with a heightened awareness of the immensity of the loss of traditional lands and some of the specific events and causes of the decimation. What makes this different from traditional teaching is that the Blanket Exercise is experienced through story and thus is more likely to be a collective experience and an emotional response that is retained longer and more completely as a memory (Haven, 2007). The greater awareness that will be achieved through the experienced story in the Blanket Exercise will position these educators and students to read and listen more critically as they consider FNMI issues in the curriculum. At this time, the objective is to create a more informed learner with an open spirit or disposition to learn more.

The far-reaching implications thus concern not only the physical distance but also the change in the participants over time, and the long-lasting consequences of the experience. Through the creation of the Blanket Exercise Kit, teacher participants will be able to extend the experience to their school communities in neighboring cities and towns. Over the course of a few years, the number of students who experience the story through the Blanket Exercise should number in the thousands. Over time, implications should be that heightened awareness of the devastating cultural decimation associated with the loss of land through unscrupulous or broken treaty agreements would lead to more honorable political decisions as participants question events of the past, assume leadership roles, and determine to address the historical wrongs.

Conclusion

Canada has an abysmal record for treatment of FNMI peoples, and has cultural amnesia working to maintain the very negative status quo for these groups. FNMI populations are the fastest growing in Canada, but they are highly overrepresented in our prisons, and highly underrepresented in our colleges and universities. Some statistics indicate barely 60% of FNMI youth completing high school. The goal of the Blanket Exercise is to work toward creating a receptive attitude and engaging the compassion of non-FNMI teachers and students by presenting one critical aspect of the history that somehow never makes its way into our history books. Most FNMI history was retained orally, and only because it was told and retold through the generations does it exist today. Much of it can be corroborated. Story will be used to convey teachings that would traditionally have been told as story (authentic) with a view to better retention of information as a base for learning FNMI history, and contributing to a larger initiative of healing.

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