

Towards a Further Understanding of What Indigenous People Have Always Known: Storytelling as the Basis of Good Pedagogy

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We are living in a time when there is a growing interest in traditional wisdom across many areas of life. What Indigenous people have always known, and what the elders have taught for centuries is now being given a second and third look by various Western academics and scientists. The increased emphasis on natural medicines, holistic healing, the necessity of leading a balanced life, caring for the Earth, and acknowledging our global connections to each other and the universe as a whole, are only some examples of 'new' waves of thought that are rooted in ancient teachings. These topics fall under the modern disciplines of Medicine, Psychology, Anthropology, and Political Science, but Education is also experiencing a renewed interest in an ancient practice: that of storytelling. Over the last few years, more and more non-Aboriginal educators are joining their Aboriginal peers, hearing the whispers of narrative and being drawn into the circle of listening.

The elder sits on a blanket sipping tea, the central figure in a circle of teenagers and their teachers who have gathered at Rocky Mountain House north of Calgary, Alberta to learn about each other's cultures. One group is from a Southern Ontario farming community; the other is from the Stoney Nakota Community of Morley, and this is the first night they have been together. Slowly conversation stops, the awkward silence of strangers who have exhausted preliminary pleasantries sets in ... and still the elder sips. After what seems like a very long time he looks up smiling, welcomes all those present to the circle, and speaks about the learning experience to follow in the coming days. Using few words, he explains that this learning will not follow the prescribed classroom style, that there will be no lectures, or handouts, or overhead notes. What each member of the circle will be invited (never forced or coerced) to tell his or her story; the story of a life, in as much detail as is comfortable, with humour if appropriate, and embellishment if desired. The rest of the circle will accept the story as a gift and will listen and learn, but will not interrupt, ridicule, or question. The process will take time,

and will be interspersed with other activities such as mountain climbing, but the main focus of time spent together will be to share and to understand each other through story. With those simple instructions, and the observation that giving such a gift requires the elements of courage and brave trust, he begins to tell about his own life. Thirty young people in the 21st Century are beckoned into an ancient pedagogy through the recounting of a story, and they respond with a level of undivided attention that amazes their watchful teachers. I can attest to this because I was there. Having long been convinced of the importance of stories to learning, and saddened by the rude disdain with which both stories and storytellers had been regularly met throughout my own experience in the Western education system, watching their faces as they listened and thought brought deep satisfaction. At last my students were going to have the rich learning experience I craved for them, and their lives would never be the same.

Stories are an integral part of our lives: an integral part that for many years was left out of Western classroom teaching practice. Today, this truth that the elders have always known is experiencing resurgence in modern pedagogy, but there are still those educators who insist on understanding storytelling as being peripheral to learning: an enjoyable, but unimportant activity. For these sceptics, and for those others who are working to change reluctant education systems that demand justification and proof, there is a rapidly growing body of research from both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal scholars that is highlighting the need for a return to that traditional practice. Some of the findings of the research will be explored in this article in an attempt to provide some answers to the sceptics and to open the door for systemic educational reform a little wider.

INTEGRATING OUR SELVES AND RELATING TO OTHERS THROUGH STORY

Long before children arrive in a classroom, they have learned the interaction of sound, words, and gestures. From the moment children are born, we use our faces and hands to convey emotions to them; our bodies enter the scene as we rock and cuddle and jiggle and pat, often in rhythm to spoken word or song. Children learn to read their parents' facial expressions and other physical postures such as a particular walk or an arm gesture and to associate particular feelings with actions, and they quickly learn to imitate

these gestures and expressions as a means for conveying their own emotions. As they mature, most children continue to experience the relationship between emotions and thoughts and the correlated physical reaction. For example, they understand the connection between fear and nausea, grief and tears, joy and laughter.

Understanding the mysterious connections between mind, body, and emotions has been the motivation behind much research. Neurobiologist Gerald Edelman (1992), in explaining the complex interactions of various parts of our brain, uses the illustration of an orchestra playing in harmony. To help clarify his complex theory and show how feelings, mind, and body have developed relationships, he uses the word *qualia* as meaning, “the collection of personal or subjective experiences, feelings, and sensations that accompany awareness” (p. 114). This is a lovely example of onomatopoeia as the word comes out of the mouth with such delicious feeling. Try it. The word sounds and feels lovely ... even as you say it you experience a collection of sensations. While this is an English word, there are examples in every language of words that unite the feelings with the sound. Consider the Plains Cree word for “run”, which is *pimipahtā*. As one who does not speak Cree, but loves to hear it spoken, the repetition of the “p” sounds, and the open vowel at the end, allows me to imagine the action. This is how we first learned to communicate.

To illustrate further how involved our bodies become in spoken language, Dissanayake (1992) describes the origin of word sounds in terms of the object they are symbolizing. For example the popping sound made by such consonants as “p” and “b” are natural examples of mimicry in English when beginning “bubbles” or “bees” or “pond.” She notes that the “m” sound requires lips to come together and often begins words that have to do with that same idea of coming together. We practice the same use of facial muscles when we screw up our noses at a bad smell and say “ew-w-w-w.” While Dissanayake is writing primarily about the development of English words, she makes the point that all languages have common sounds that mimic the object or thought being conveyed. I have often thought that a lovely exercise to conduct in a multi-cultural classroom would be to have students share the basic sounds of their language and compare the representations of words to actions and objects.

This notion that words developed as a response to natural

surroundings and as physical illustrations of the objects they symbolized does not contradict the notions of language development put forward by Bruner (1990) and Donald (2001) in that these first “words” in every culture were necessary in order to *tell* something. According to this thinking, the need for human beings to communicate was the driving force behind using the body to formulate symbolic sounds that could be easily understood. Every part of the human self was involved in this communication. Dissanayake (1992) further explains how these responses developed out of an early need to relate and were responsible for physiological changes in the human brain. We cannot help but react psycho-biologically to sound and sight, because we are wired to do so at our very core. And this physical connection pertains to narrative as well.

Untangling the evidence and trying to trace the inception of the idea that we have an integrated mind, body and soul, which comprises a whole being that can be fully expressed through narrative, is a complicated process. Rather than trying to establish a clear and precise genealogy of this notion, it is helpful to review some of the paths down which this idea has taken educational researchers. Grumet (1988) and Abram (1996), especially, note that pedagogy can effectively include many forms of narrative, including the familiar oral and written styles, but extending to stories told through dance, music and visual art. While the embodiment of emotion in dance and drama is obvious for the primary performers, it is important to note that these forms of embodiment can also be observed when an audience begins to sway, rock, grimace, etc. as the feelings expressed are passed on. Observing the enthusiasm of uninhibited young people at a dance can be an interesting exercise for teachers. What becomes obvious is that they are engaged and involved with what is happening or being said, and this engagement is reflected through every aspect of reaction. Is there an aspect of narrative that would allow this engagement and full involvement of self to continue in the classroom or other learning situations? My experience in the circle as young people began to tell and listen to their stories says there is.

THE “SO WHAT” OF THIS RESEARCH IN MODERN CLASSROOMS

Writing of the integral connection between living, loving, and learning, Grumet (1988) defines epistemological knowledge as that which is derived through relationships: relationships that are forged through some

form of narrative experience during which we either express or understand ourselves, and others, through stories told. With specific reference to schools and classrooms she writes of the importance of reading stories, not merely as an exercise in studying literature, but as a means to form relationships and to particularly bridge the gap between private and public lives. She understands the reading of a story to be direct communication between the writer and the reader. By coining the term "body-reader" (p. 130), Grumet emphasizes the need for children to have an experience of reading that encompasses their whole selves, including their bodies. She gives examples of times when stories are read to children who are comfortably seated in a comfortable chair or lounging on the ground, as compared to the formal settings of classrooms where the body can be anything but comfortable. Her theory is that when the body is taken into account, reading a story becomes a sensuous experience, and the words on the page connect to children's lives. She makes the interesting point that perhaps schools fail to encourage this type of complete interaction with the text because teachers are not equipped to deal with the fearful emotions that might arise if students truly entered into the private world of the author. She goes so far as to suggest that school texts are chosen with care in order to avoid the most disturbing of social issues, thereby ensuring that a rather bland diet of literature is served to students. She says, "It would be a gesture of shallow arrogance to suggest that we (by reading) can resolve these issues. What I hope to suggest are ways of working with teachers and students that honour them, ways that permit the sorrow and celebration" (p. 131). A notion echoed by Armstrong (2013) when she wryly asks, "... the stories seem less threatening. A children's book cannot change the status quo. Right?" (p. 52). Both educators would agree with author Richard Wagamese (personal communication, October 2012) that "the world can be changed one story at a time".

The embodiment of stories read is one aspect of the integration of mind, body, and emotion, but even greater is the embodiment of stories told. David Abram, in his essay, "Storytelling and Wonder: On the Rejuvenation of Oral Culture" (2005), points out the physicality of oral storytelling. The psycho-biological connection is readily apparent. Not only is the body actually used to transmit words, i.e. through the mouth and ears but, oral storytelling generally involves a face-to-face encounter, meaning that both teller and hearer can see each other's expressions as emotions and body

language change. The storyteller transmits the story using mouth, facial expressions and body language and the hearer listens and interprets the teller's verbal and non-verbal cues. Dissanayake (2011) concurs when she points out that while writing may have enhanced the forms of poetry, oral storytelling remains both an affective and an effective vehicle for the transmission of emotion. In response to both the written word AND modern technology, Abram goes so far as to say,

It is possible that we are making a grave mistake in our rush to wire every classroom, and to bring our children online as soon as possible. ... the astonishing linguistic and intellectual capacity of the human brain did not evolve in relation to the computer! Nor, of course, did it evolve in relation to the written word. Rather it evolved in relation to orally told stories. (2007, para. 3)

He also believes that our children should not just be told stories; they should be told stories about the land on which they live. Accordingly, those stories should be told as close to the earth as possible, in order that the physical elements of wind and sun and rain can be felt. He purports that when our entire selves experience connection to all that surrounds us we will begin to fully know ourselves as created beings. What a contrast between what Abram describes and what students experience in most school classrooms. How parallel is this teaching to the ancient understanding that the Land is our first teacher and that Her stories are embedded within us.

If the teacher must understand a concept before being able to pass it on to students, then Robert Nash (2004) seeks to enact change in classrooms. He challenges the whole idea of scholarship for his teacher candidates as well as graduate students by saying, "You are a scholar to the extent that you can tell a good instructive story. You are a scholar if you can capture the narrative quality of your human experience in language that inspires others" (p. 46). He maintains that the purpose of education is to become an authentic person, producing a state where "becoming and being are on a par with knowing and mastering" (p. 45). A powerful means to this end is the writing of what he calls scholarly personal narratives, the stories of students' lives. And for what purpose these stories? The purpose is at least two-fold: to understand their own lives better, even to the extent of healing their own emotional wounds and the understanding of each other through the experience of empathy. Nash includes in his text examples of personal

narratives that not only show how the inner truth and the outer truth become balanced, but also demonstrate how that balance brings about healing for the writer.

While Nash's students write and speak their narratives primarily for the growth of personal relationships, as did the students in the circle at Rocky Mountain House, other educators stress the importance of narrative in order to build relationship with unknown others. For Paulo Freire (1970) the ability to speak, to share one's own story with others, and to be transformed through the dialogue is the paramount objective of education. It is not enough that a story simply be recounted; it must be part of a sharing between people that allows them an understanding of each other, an understanding so deep that they can never view each other as objects again. Using the word dialogue to denote the act of sharing stories, of sharing selves, Freire outlines the various components of this intentional activity. Dialogue is not only an intellectual exercise for him. It involves complete emotional commitment between parties, and the recognition of the fear such risk involves. He states, "Dialogue further requires an intense faith in humankind, faith in their power to make and remake, to create and recreate, faith in their vocation to be more fully human" (p. 71). He challenges educators to teach students, by modelling, that the acknowledgement of our shared humanity through story is what will change the world. A concept powerfully envisioned and enacted during the days my students were together.

John Paul Eakin (1999) takes this notion even further when he says, "Narration is by definition a relational act, and the acquisition of narrative competence is transacted intersubjectively" (p. 116). He goes on to contend that, as adults, we continue to develop the linguistic skills that allow us to narrate our own lives. In evolutionary terms, we develop the skills most needed to enhance relationships and strengthen our connectedness to each other. Perhaps this is why the concept of narrative, as observed earlier, is becoming more popular at a time when relationships are weakened through the widespread use of personal communication devices such as tablets and smartphones that effectively isolate us from each other and distort our connections. Abram (2007) theorizes that narrative, especially oral storytelling, is a necessary reaction to this isolation. At a time when technological advancement threatens to disconnect us from our stories, Abram's theory is particularly pertinent. No one in that circle used social

media to communicate with the others. Every story was told face to face, shoulder to shoulder.

If young people are to learn to care for themselves, each other, their communities, the environment, and all other created elements, according to Noddings (2003) they must be in relationship with those elements. In other words, they must experience firsthand the connected reality of their own lives and those of all other life forms. They must internalize a caring attitude by developing empathy and understanding. How can this happen? Storytelling can become the “Eastern door” through which we can come to know and understand ourselves and others, as well as all created elements of the universe. Armstrong says of Richard Wagamese,

(He) is a great author because he finds ways to connect his stories to our humanity. As we continually search for our own meaning and purpose, these stories allow us to communicate with others who are also searching. In that communication we develop understandings of our shared humanity, and realize that our differences enrich that shared journey. (2013, p.37)

The reality of residential school survivors offers a chilling example of what happens when not only individuals, but also whole groups of people are disconnected from their story. Because the children in residential schools were not allowed to speak their language, they lost the ability to understand the past through the narratives of their people. They suffered exactly the abuses of education of which Chomsky (2000) warns, and they are still struggling to reintegrate the past and present. Bruner (1990), while outlining several circumstances that contribute to a breakdown in culture in general or even within a family culture, identifies “the impoverishment of narrative” (p. 96) as being a primary cause of such disarray. He points to situations where groups of people have been oppressed for so long that they cannot remember any variation to the desperate story they are now living. This, too, can apply to students whose home lives are such that they have lost the ability to hear anything other than the worst scenario ending. In our classrooms we can try to begin a different story for these young people and hope that it will enable them to envision some element of the extraordinary.

It would not be fair to imply that all educators who propose that stories be regularly included in curriculum do so solely for the purpose of strengthening these connections, or that this is the only purpose that

stories can serve in a classroom. Kieran Egan (1986) makes the point that the rhythm of stories enables students to remember facts more easily. He identifies teachers as “the storytellers of our tribe” when they tell the “great stories of the world” (p. 109). He suggests that students’ ability to remember the details of those stories is directly affected by the teacher’s ability to convey the drama of those events. The stated goal of including storytelling in the curriculum is to improve students’ retention of detail. This is a very pragmatic and certainly not a bad use of storytelling, since he is probably right about the effects of both practices. This notion connects to Abram’s (2007) idea that storytelling passes down instructions for particular activities in a manner that is easy to remember. What is interesting is that both rhythm and drama involve the use of the body. The implication of Egan’s statements is that students learn more through narrative because it becomes physical.

Also of particular interest to educators is Jerome Bruner’s third feature of narrative, which is its ability to link the common and the extraordinary (1990). This relationship is a dual carriageway: the common can explain or normalize the extraordinary by converting abnormal, even frightening, events into part of a story, just as the extraordinary can raise the common to the sacred. In practical terms, we are all familiar with idea that speaking a circumstance out loud enables the speaker to gain some needed objective distance. Physicians use this when they ask patients to verbalize a diagnosis, as in, “I have cancer and I am going to get treatment.” Mental health counsellors use narrative in all its forms to allow clients to see and hear what has happened to them. “The function of the story is to find an intentional state that mitigates or at least makes comprehensible a deviation from a canonical cultural pattern” (Bruner, 1990, p. 50). In our circle we witnessed some painful moments as hard stories were told, but we also witnessed moments of great humour and joy as some life experiences were discovered to be shared across cultures ... an uncommon bond becoming extraordinary.

Children are supposed to outlive parents; life is supposed to be fulfilling; love is supposed to last a lifetime. When these expectations are not met, we use this feature of narrative to make sense of whatever happens that is unusual, be it scary or amazing. But we sometimes do not pay as much attention to the converse, to the allowing of the common to become extraordinary, even sacred. For this we need poets and writers such as Abram

(1996) who reminds us that, "Ultimately, then it is not the human body alone but rather the whole of the sensuous world that provides the deep structure of language" (p. 85).

A VOICE FROM THE SCEPTICS

But, is there a problem with the *truth* of narrative and of other such subjective experiences, particularly in classrooms? Was every detail related during our story telling factual, or were there exaggerations and embellishments? While Chomsky and Bruner have identified political situations where narrative can be intentionally manipulated, is it important to consider our varying perceptions and the unconscious "colouring" of a story when assessing the appropriateness of narrative in pedagogy? After posing the question of how much of what auto biographers say they experience is equivalent to what they really experience and how much of it is merely what they know how to say, Eakin (1999) answers that the impact of our own narrative is such that we are what we say anyway. He goes on to note that our perception of reality and our ability to name that reality are so tied together that separating them is not helpful to the discussion (p. 4).

This argument answers critics such as Phillips (2000), who claims that truth should be the deciding factor as to whether a narrative is useful or not. He states that the question needing to be asked is "Was the story's narrator presenting me with the *correct* narrative?" (Phillips, 2000, p. 77). In line with positivist thinking, Phillips (2000) cites examples where researchers interested in asserting the importance of narrative cast truth aside, and ends his argument by stating, "Narrative researchers seem cavalierly to reject the latter situations, where truth of narrative is relevant, and reduce all situations to the category where truth is irrelevant" (p. 77). Leggo (2005), however, maintains that "language does not empower me to nail down truth or truths. Instead, language is dynamic and energetic and opens up possibilities for understanding our lives and experiences and relations" (p. 177). Nash (2004), when addressing the issue of truth, stated:

What makes a story true for all people in all times and places is not simply whether it can stand the test of scientific experiment ... truth is what works best for the narrator and the reader in the never-ending quest to find and construct narratives of meaning, both for self and others. (p. 33)

An ongoing discussion about the qualities and variations of the *true* meaning of *truth* should not be shied away from in classrooms, but should be approached as a collaborative journey of discovery. Foy's (2009) *Talk Story* approach, based on the belief that each person in the circle brings a part of the whole picture, lends itself perfectly to just such a discussion, and frees the teacher to trust that the process itself will write the emerging story.

THE JOURNEY CONTINUES

The common thread of the importance of stories in all our lives is woven through this literature. It would be no surprise to Donald that Nash's students found themselves healthier and happier through the writing of their narratives, as he would purport that their cerebral make-up had been changed through the activity. Interestingly, Mehl-Madrona (2005) includes the concept of physical healing through narrative when he explains his understanding of the links between our brain activity, healing and stories. He wrote:

Change the stories and perception changes. Changed perception means changed experience, and change in experience alters brain biology. Since the brain regulates everything in the body, including the immune system, the body changes when the brain changes. Here is the beginning of our understanding about how stories have healing power. (p. 7)

It is time we began to take seriously the ancient teachings and understand the power of stories in our lives. Jennifer David, writing to introduce her collected conversations with Aboriginal writers, wrote:

[Story tellers] believe that lives are shaped by the stories told by parents, grandparents, elders. A reverence for story telling as a bridge between hearts, eras, peoples. And, most of all, a faith that stories are an indestructible vessel for bringing old wisdom to life in a new time. (p.1)

People have known for a long time that stories bring powerful healing to both teller and listener. Unfortunately, in some quarters it has taken scientific evidence to convince educators that this is so and that the journey of education should bring healing rather than ignoring hurt and/or confusion by avoiding important issues.

As an educator I desire nothing more than to give students the ability

to reflect on their own stories and those of the world around them in the two ways that Bruner has described. I want them to be able to see their lives as part of an unfolding narrative which began before them and will continue after them, but which needs their contribution in the *now*. This knowledge will give them the roots they need to know their selves as fully human and to frame their life events, even the tragic ones, within an integrated and connected framework: they are not living their lives in isolation. I also want them to have the ability to recognize the divine, the sacred, in the ordinary and know that others share the intense and intimate emotions that recognition evokes. The strengthening of these connections will give students dreams and visions for their own lives as well as a deep concern for the lives of all other creatures, even the very planet itself. In Armstrong's words:

Our stories, all our stories, can create a pathway for a stronger, validating education, but we do have to listen. For the stories will teach each of us – if we are willing and can learn to listen to them – how we might serve as an agent for change. That is the power of the story. (2013, p. 61)

In light of this truth our teacher education programs need to move towards a training of pre-service teachers such as Armstrong (2013) describes: one that encourages these students to embrace the full impact that stories can have in their future classrooms and enables them to courageously change the way curriculum is often presently delivered. To meet this challenge these teachers in training will need to fully understand that stories are not just a nice way to pass an afternoon (although they certainly are that!), but they are really the only form of pedagogy that will touch, form, inform, and re-form students in every aspect of their being ... from their innermost cells out.

Our relationship with stories is intimate and all encompassing. In *The Truth About Stories* Thomas King (2003) writes his often quoted statement, "The truth about stories is that that's all we are" (p. 2). When those young people told their stories to each other, they gave the gift of their very selves and influenced each other's' lives to a degree that no textbook ever could. In fact, I believe the elders would take Donald's assertions that our very cellular makeup is changed through stories one step further. They would say that our very cellular makeup *is* a story, and one that can change the world if we, as educators, are willing to listen to that ancient wisdom.

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