

Incorporating Talk Story into the Classroom

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Indigenous pedagogy and andragogy can be utilized to inform Indigenous peoples of their specific ways of being, knowing and doing. Talk Story is an Indigenous teaching methodology that utilizes informal circle discussion to integrate individual contributions into collective thought and memory for learners involved. Incorporating Talk Story into the classroom as a teaching strategy enhances Eurocentric pedagogical and andragogical methodologies while honouring Indigenous pedagogy and andragogy. Talk Story provides learners from both Indigenous and non-Indigenous backgrounds to experience Indigenous learning methodologies in concert with Eurocentric methodologies.

BACKGROUND

The integration of Indigenous pedagogical and andragogical strategies into classrooms can facilitate the enrichment of learning. Dei (2002) argued that when Indigenous knowledge is placed within Euro-American educational contexts, it can make education an experientially-based, non-universal, holistic and relational knowledge of resistance. Friesen (1999) discussed the power of legends as pedagogical tools and expressed regret that Native pedagogy has not penetrated the pedagogical ranks of contemporary teacher training. Chambers (1992) discussed Dene pedagogy, stating that storytelling is such a significant educative practice for all Indigenous cultures that it should become a communicative practice within education. Aikenhead (2001) described an educational strategy that included Elders in a science class. In this description, the science teachers explained the science topic from a Eurocentric perspective and the Elders explained the concept using Indigenous knowledge.

Aikenhead's discussion lends substance to the notion that teachers can become culture-brokerers as they validate Indigenous knowledge within the classroom by allowing Elders to provide their expertise and then discuss how Eurocentric and Indigenous knowledge may be connected. Learners from both Eurocentric and Indigenous backgrounds learn about each others'

understanding of science concepts. This strategy honours learners' personal pre-conceptions of subject matter, and builds respect for science concepts within both Eurocentric and Indigenous contexts so learners can appreciate knowledge within each culture. Dei, Friesen, Chambers and Aikenhead's work may reflect a need to enhance Eurocentric education with Indigenous pedagogies and andragogies to provide students with opportunities to learn within their own cultural knowledge. Indigenous cultural activities such as storytelling, outdoor field trips and hands on activities can enrich learning possibilities for students. The conscious inclusion using Eurocentric and Indigenous knowledge honours all learners' understandings of cultural knowledge.

TALK STORY

Talk Story is one of numerous Indigenous strategies that can be employed in classrooms in an effort to bridge the gap between Eurocentric and Indigenous pedagogies and andragogies. Talk Story, a form of group discussion characterized by its circular dynamic, allows educators and learners to contextualize theory with their life experiences to build group consciousness. Indigenous pedagogy and andragogy utilizes the Elders' knowledge passed down from previous generations' dialogue with listeners to build collective understanding. These teachings encompass the collective knowledge of many Indigenous groups in North America.

Talk Story creates an atmosphere for learners and educators to integrate individual consciousness into collective thought by utilizing the basic tenets of respectful listening without interrupting. Dene Elders have explained that Eurocentric schooling has taught learners to talk more than is necessary (Christian & Gardner, 1977). Within Indigenous pedagogy and andragogy, learners go to Elders with a question when learners are ready to listen. Elders provide knowledge to those learners mature enough to receive the information. Learners are expected to actively listen to the narrative and then integrate the collective messages within their personal base of knowledge. Essential to this Talk Story process is the notion that listeners who ask too many questions or constantly give their opinions can hamper the process. Within Talk Story, educators encourage more listening than talking to promote listener/narrative learning. Learners wait for opportunities to speak as their silence provides time to listen and interpret what they are hearing and

how this personally relates to them and the others in the group. Thus, when they contribute they will be speaking to the level of discussion/learning taking place and will add to the collective thought developing in the group.

Graveline (1998) described Aboriginal consciousness as a relationship of the reactions of seeing, hearing, tasting, feeling and touching the surrounding physical environment. Merchant (1989) explained that sight, smell, sound, taste and touch create a total "participatory consciousness" (p. 20). She explained Eurocentric consciousness of "seeing is believing" employs a form of ontology that is empirical in nature. Talk Story provides an avenue for educators and learners to broaden their use of senses for understanding human relations. For example, listening to expressions of feelings and watching body language can trigger the observers' senses enough to create taste and smell sensations. Providing learning strategies that promote use of most of the senses expand students' possibilities for learning.

The Indigenous notion of formulating knowledge occurs as educators and learners share. Sharing creates connection with each other and this builds relationships. Educators and learners begin to understand how life experiences impact personal learning experiences. Wilson (2004) stated that Indigenous research paradigm can be based on the belief that knowledge is relational:

Relationality seems to sum up the whole Indigenous research paradigm to me. Just as the components of the paradigm are related, the components themselves all have to do with relationships. The ontology and epistemology are based upon a process of relationships that form a mutual reality. The axiology and methodology are based upon maintaining accountability to these relationships. (p.135)

Wilson stated that Talk Story is an Indigenous pedagogical and andragogical teaching strategy that compliments the Indigenous research paradigm. Talk Story encourages learners to develop confidence to incorporate life experiences within the classroom, to articulate personal understandings of what their classmates are saying and then to be accountable to each other as they come to a consensual understanding of the meaning of course content. Learners and educators then develop strategies to support each other's understanding and build analysis based on the collective sharing and thinking process. Learners soon realize the benefits of supporting each other's efforts to learn rather than competing against one another for the educators' attention.

PROCESS OF TALK STORY

Talk story can begin with a talking circle – a structured process for participants to share or communicate in turn. Participants listen and speak in turn as the discussion flows around the circle. Only one person has the floor at any one time and participants do not interrupt one another as the discussion progresses in a circular manner. The etiquette associated with the talking circle follows Brant's (1990) ethic of non-interference. While all may not agree, Brant maintained that providing advice, instruction, orders, or persuasion is considered inappropriate behaviour within Indigenous cultural frameworks. Indigenous participants are trained to listen and make their decisions based on combining new knowledge with that already attained.

Within Talk Story the discussion is less ordered. Participants are expected to contribute when they have something to add to the topic being discussed. They are expected to respectfully honour each other's contributions by complimenting rather than criticizing ideas, until they have developed a clear understanding of the topic. Discussion takes an unstructured order back and forth across the circle with each participant waiting to speak until after the previous speaker is finished. This unstructured process promotes the concept of only speaking when ready to contribute to what has already been expressed, and the conversation can flow back and forth across and around the circle.

Wilson (2004) described Talk Story as a process for individuals to relationally grasp the meaning and application of content and build a cumulative analysis of collective thought through a consensual process. Talk Story utilizes the parameters of a talking circle. The one difference is that the participants respectfully contribute when they have something to add to a previous speaker's comments. Talk Story conversation becomes more unstructured because participants can contribute outside the circular order. However, all the other rules of a talking circle, such as active listening, sharing and respecting each other's views as equal, remain. Wilson stated that when everyone's ideas or theories are considered equal the need for critical or judgmental discussion can be avoided. This provides a platform for Eurocentric and Indigenous theory to be utilized in discussion. Participants are instructed not to challenge each other's ideas; this replaces the potential for competition with cooperation and collaboration. While Talk Story uses unstructured rather than directional speaking order respectful relations are

practiced through uninterrupted listening within the Talk Story process.

Some learners may not have a full understanding of the complexity and impact of sharing and conversation flow in a Talk Story. Mayer (personal communication, February 4, 2008) explained that she provided learners with circle discussion flow diagrams at the beginning of class and instructed them to track the circle discussion flow in the first Talk Story session. At the end of the class, learners can assess if they personally dominated or interrupted the discussion and can reflect on how they should listen and participate in the next Talk Story to provide respectful communication.

Brant (1990) explained that when educators lecture, advise, and direct, Indigenous people are more, rather than less nervous. In an Indigenous cultural framework learners must develop relationships with their Indigenous knowledge and form their own conclusions to understand why and how to learn and apply acquired knowledge. Similarly, in the classroom, learners need to grasp the meaning and application of Eurocentric and Indigenous content by having opportunities to discuss it amongst each other.

PREPARATION FOR TALK STORY

Educators have a unique and challenging role within Talk Story. Educators must provide learners with background to understand the purpose of talking circles and must provide learners with a basic understanding of respectfully active listening, patiently waiting, openly accepting others concepts, honouring confidentiality when private life experiences are shared, and staying until the discussion is finished. Once learners understand these talking circle concepts, they can apply them within a Talk Story. The only difference is that the order of speaking can be unstructured.

An important, widely-held imperative in the field of education is that learners must contribute respectfully in class. Freire (2000) outlined learners must develop a process to understand it is their duty to outline their most significant thinking without dominating the discussion. Educators should discuss the parameters of expected behaviour at the beginning of Talk Story and explain that learners will personally assess how well they practiced their respectful listening skills with their circle flow diagrams. Educators assist learners to reflect on management of their personal circle discussions.

Preparation for Talk Story involves development of clear student expectations. If the learning level requires course outlines, then Talk Story partici-

pation expectations should be included. Talk Story is a classroom discussion tool and can function well if educators and learners have read all their appropriate materials for the discussion to be covered. Educators can model the process by providing the content and link content to their real life experiences to provide examples for learners to follow.

According to Wilson (2004), Talk Story begins with an introduction to set the tone for the discussion, where learners become comfortable sharing their thoughts and emotions respectfully before moving to class content discussions. He related this readiness to setting the stage properly for ceremonies as everyone participating needs to get into the right state of mind to hear and understand the discussion. Educators can play a significant role ensuring that learners understand the amount of information that can be shared, how it can be shared and the responsibility of each learner to respect and honour the privacy of each others' stories in learning. Hooks (1994) wrote that it is crucial to create excitement in the university classroom. She explained it was important to appreciate the learners' uniqueness and interact according to their needs. This is similar to the old ways of the Dene learning environment (Chambers, 1992) that included physical, emotional and Spiritual surroundings. Chambers wrote, "the Dene remind us that all knowledge is "storied," that is, knowing and communicating are always partial (no one knows the whole story) and contextualized (all stories are rooted in a particular time, place, and set of sociocultural conditions)" (p.1). Thus, the story had to be compared with individuals' personal experiences and the individuals' culture formed the basis of the curriculum. Likewise, learners within Talk Story utilize their life experiences as the base for new knowledge acquisition, just as the Dene did.

Hooks (1994) stated that educators who genuinely express interest in learners' presence and voice create a comfort zone for learners to contribute. This sets the parameters for learners to explore their thoughts in relation to the topics being discussed in the classroom and removes nervousness about sharing. As Talk Story discussion proceeds, individuals' understanding is enhanced by others' understanding of the subject matter until the group collectively develops a critical awareness through consensus.

Talk Story can compliment a lecture or can be an alternative to a lecture. For example, the lecture might be a one-hour class and then the Talk Story would be another one-hour class. In this case, learners would listen, take

lecture notes and then flesh out their understanding of the content within the Talk Story process in the next class. If Talk Story is used as an alternative to a lecture, content backgrounders such as Powerpoint presentations, journal articles, texts or videos are pre assigned prior to Talk Story classes. Backgrounders can be provided through web based platforms such as Moodle, email, course packs or texts. Class time is then used for discussing the content within Talk Story.

Classes larger than thirty learners can hinder the Talk Story process. Mayer (personal communication, February 4, 2008) split classes into small groups, and asked each group to discuss and the topic. One learner from each group, comfortable with reporting back, would reflect the principle points that the group discussed to the plenary. Then the whole class could reflect on their learning.

CHALLENGES

Several challenges must be addressed if Talk Story is to be successful. Talk Story is most suitable for educators with highly developed facilitation skills and an ability to honour Indigenous teaching methods. Hooks (1994) stated teaching is a practice of freedom where educators have to believe learners are capable of learning and that the beginning of learning is sharing. Educators need the ability to provide examples of where learners may run into trouble (wanting to counter each others' views, wanting to interrupt to challenge, daydreaming) and to assist learners to build active listening skills.

Talk Story may be most suitable for those educators who practice Freire's (2000) dialogical concept of teaching. Freire described educators who use the banking concept are the educational experts and learners are the "receptacles" to be "filled" (p. 72). The banking concept consists of having experts provide all the knowledge for the learners. The banking concept expects learners to accept prescribed knowledge from educators. Conversely, within the dialogical concept educators and learners create a process to learn more than they already know as everyone is assumed to bring knowledge to the classroom. This creates equality between educators and learners as knowledge and learning is shared and built upon. If educators are using the banking concept they need to dramatically change their teaching strategies to incorporate Talk Story.

Learners must be motivated to participate fully in the process. When

course outlines are supplied to learners, the outlines must accurately outline the Talk Story process and learner participation expectations to practice alternative methods of engagement in learning. Educators must trust their own abilities to share their knowledge. Educators must know enough about their subject matter to be able to discuss it without texts and notes in front of them. They must be able to relate their subject matter to not only their lives but to those of their learners. Educators must share their emotions, their experiences.

Educators can develop the understanding that lectures are delivery tools and Talk Stories are delivery and discussion tools. Talk Story is a process for learning where participants are expected to listen respectfully and contribute by building on each other's ideas to gain collective thought and understanding. Learners use their collective analysis garnered from Talk Story within assignments, projects and tests. The circle discussion flow diagrams are used as personal performance indicators rather than as assessment tools for grading purposes. Talk Story provides opportunity for personal growth and development as learners explore their own ideas intermingled with their classmates. They then are graded on how they apply their learning within their assignments rather than being graded on participation in Talk Story.

Incorporating Talk Story into the classroom creates a new richness of understanding of Indigenous pedagogy and andragogy. According to Hooks (1994), to teach effectively within a diverse student body, educators and learners have to learn the *cultural codes* embedded within the students in the classroom. As she says, "this act [learning the cultural codes] alone transforms the classroom" (p. 41). Within Talk Story both educators and learners must learn the *code* of listening and consensual decision-making. This process of understanding both Eurocentric and Indigenous pedagogies begins the decolonization of education for marginalized groups. According to Battiste (2004), "a decolonised curriculum, then, is the shared curriculum for those who have been colonized and those who have colonized" (p. 62). She explained decolonising education enriches everyone's lives whether they are Aboriginal or not. Battiste outlined Indigenous knowledge offers people a chance to comprehend another view of humanity as they never have had the opportunity to do before. Thus the question to be answered is whether we as educators feel that decolonizing Eurocentric andragogy with inclusion of Indigenous pedagogy and andragogy should be part of our roles and responsibilities.

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