CONCEPT
The Journal of Contemporary Community Education Practice Theory

Vol. 14, No. 3, Winter 2023

Storytelling for Each Weaves a Blanket for All

Beth Cross, University of the West of Scotland,

Jennifer Markides, University of Calgary

Donald Smith, Scottish Storytelling Centre

The United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child (Unicef, 1989), amongst other things, names the right to identity, the right to play and the right to a voice. Storytelling weaves together all three. Stories are carried through song, sculpture, weavings, drawings and the told word. To celebrate and nourish them is central to human health and to the work many of us do regardless of our job designations, wherever being a good listener is the primary skill we hone.

Yet, as we sit down to transmute onto paper what began as conversation, we have to acknowledge that we live in times in which industries are committed to weaponising stories; stories that wield the most basic of fears, like a knife to rip apart communities that need to collaborate now more than ever - stories as conflagrations of panic. This is happening at the same time as social media practices that privilege the pose reduce stories to gestures, and shallow out attention spans, pushing to the edges more complicated pictures of relationships and how we rub along.

The occasion of the Scottish International Storytelling Festival 2023, with its theme Right to be Human to commemorate the 75th Anniversary of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, brought us together to explore how dignity, respect, equality and compassion are carried within stories, and what our work with stories can do in this time to make more tangible how human rights are bound up with the rights of those we share the world with. In Global Lab, an afternoon discussion forum within the festival, we explored, not a judicial definition of rights but a relationship-based understanding of rights and the place of stories in fostering this (Graeber and Wengrow, 2021)

Coming together, we acknowledged that we write from the traditional territories of the people of the Treaty 7 region in Southern Alberta, which includes the Blackfoot Confederacy (comprising the Siksika, Piikani, and Kainai First Nations), the Tsuut'ina First Nation, and the Stoney Nakoda (including Chiniki, Bearspaw, and Goodstoney First Nations). The City of Calgary is also home to Métis Nation of Alberta, Region III. And also from a land criss-crossed

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by Picts, Celts, Angles and Nordic peoples, where traditional travelling people still live nomadic lives play a crucial role in the resurgence of traditional stories, songs and crafts here in Scotland. Our discussion came at the same time as the call for 'arts for all' and helped us sieve through our conversations to distil important themes that have a bearing on diversity and inclusion work.

First, we want to take time to ground our sense of what story is: why it is such a fundamental human orientation. This leads to a discussion of the importance of stories' intergenerational transmission, the issues within this, and thus a key focal point for work with communities (Fendler, 2013). As we look closely at what is carried between generations within story, we look at story as creative orientation, story as a way of working through trauma, and trauma being reworked in story. All are vital touch points to understand. Rather than a list of stories, or suggestions for how to facilitate activities, it is this awareness, this presence, with which to engage with story that we advocate as most important to share, to refine and to pass on.

We work daily on developing this awareness in ourselves (Wall Kimmerer, 2013). Beth was introduced to storytelling by a tradition-bearer of Scotland's Travelling People, Duncan Williamson, and since those early lessons has undergone a fundamental reorganisation of how she understands learning and relating through storytelling (Cross, 2009). Storytelling, storyseeding and story listening have developed as practice with communities, schools and in supervision of PhD students over thirty years, much of that under the mentorship of Donald who directs the Scottish Storytelling Centre.

Storytelling was foundational to Jennifer's work as a Montessori educator. The 5 Great Lessons are used to introduce teachings at the start of each year. As a Montessori teacher, she was used to sharing power in the classroom. The space, materials, and direction of learning belonged to the students. Similarly, she prefers to share power in research relationships. She is aware of the importance of listening to and learning from student voice, autonomy, and agency. In her doctoral study, she used Stó:lō scholar, Jo-ann Archibald's (2008) Indigenous storywork as a guiding methodology for research with youth, gathering their stories of living through the 2013 Alberta floods. She listened holistically— mind, body, spirit, and emotion— with a responsibility to carry their stories forward. In doing so, these reflections and reactions informed learning in response to what was shared. Stories teach us vicariously and by example. They knit us together in place, time, belonging, and teachings.

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What is Story?

Experience rushes by until we hold it in a story. Within childhood, we are natural nest builders out of an instinct to strain from time those bits we want to shelter and, by so doing, build something of ourselves with. Nests are safe spaces to play with possible selves and possible stories that bring us together with those with whom we share the world.

Stories that help a child share the world are interwoven with relationships. This is a key facet to remember when drawing on storytelling explicitly within education or community work. As this article is about storytelling, we thought it would be fitting to include a story Donald told during the Global Lab that illustrates the relational quality of storytelling:

> The storyteller as the person who is relating, who is gifting, who is sharing is equally important as the story itself. I learned this watching storytellers in action, and particularly storytellers who had grown up within the Scottish traveller tradition, where children are honoured and put at the centre of the culture. I used to take some of these older Scottish traveller storytellers - Duncan Williamson, Willie Mcfee - into schools, and you would always have this thing where you would have a particular time slot maybe between interval and lunchtime. Maybe you had 40 minutes.
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> And, without fail, at the beginning of these sessions the traveller storytellers would spend time doing what seemed to be nothing. They would just sit there and maybe play a tune on a jaws harp. Or Duncan would share a memory from his childhood, ... maybe for Christmas, they had one orange shared out between them all, whatever it was.
>
> And I would be looking at my watch thinking, come on, that's 10 minutes in and nobody has told a story yet and we've only got 40 minutes. And then I twigged: of course, they had the right of this. What they wanted was, they wanted the kids to feel relaxed, to feel related to them, to feel recognized, to feel on the same level as them. And then when they felt the relationship was settled and settling, they would go into sharing a story.
>
> And I watched - it was absolutely fascinating - you'd get a big mob of kids, and Willie, a great, big man, sitting there as if he had all the time in the world. He'd start the story and gradually those kids would move closer. They were moving closer and closer to him. Until, by the time you got to the end of the session, they were all, you know, virtually gathered in.
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> So that was a very interesting lesson for me. It's that relationship and that sense of establishing a bond that is so important if the storytelling is genuinely going to be a relating and a sharing.

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We can look deeper into this relational quality of storytelling. In oral cultures, Indigenous cultures, storytelling is education, record keeping, activism, and more. Stories hold the values, histories, and knowledges of the communities. Where stories come from is an integral part of their worth, because stories hold the power of place (Marker 2018). For this reason, many Indigenous storytellers share where the story comes from: what people, what territory, what season it is told, who has the rights to share it or not, and who told it to them. One of our favourite storytellers, Richard Van Camp, is Tłı̨chǫ Dene from Fort Smith. He is a role model for how to begin a story and honour the story's caretakers in the telling. When he shares the 'Moose Story' Van Camp (2020) cites where he is as he tells the story - in the river valley in Treaty 6 territory - and the original teller of the story, the late Trevor Evans, who shared it with him. Doing so gives the story context and authority, and shows respect for where the ideas and teachings in the story have come from. This is a parallel process to how scholars reference their sources in the Euro-western tradition; notably, the oral storytelling practices pre-date academic conventions.

Storytelling is likely our most powerful decolonizing force, and the mechanism that kept Indigenous knowledges alive in places where our ceremonies and languages were banned. Cree and Saulteaux scholar, Margaret Kovach states, 'My sense is that skilled orators, then and now, were able to imbue energy through word choice, and allow listeners to walk inside the story to find their own teachings' (2009, p. 60):

> Stories remind us of who we are and of our belonging. Stories hold within them knowledges while simultaneously signifying relationships. In oral tradition, stories can never be decontextualized from the teller. They are active agents within a relational world, pivotal in gaining insight into a phenomenon. Oral stories are born of connections within the world, and are thus recounted relationally. They tie us with our past and provide a basis for continuity with future generations. (Kovach, 2009, p. 94).

Some stories hold records of specific events and seasonal teachings. Others hold lessons that transcend time, place, events, and history (Cruikshank, 1998). Stories teach about values, relationships, and interconnection. That is why we should be mindful of the stories we tell. As Cherokee and Greek storyteller, Thomas King says, 'The truth about stories is that that's all we are' (2003, p. 2) [While this reference is from the book, we recommend listening to podcasts available through CBC Ideas for the full experience and benefit that oral storytelling offers].

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Part 1 of King's Massey Lecture series juxtaposes two creation stories. This example highlights, quite pointedly, the ways different worldviews are perpetuated through the stories we value, privilege, and tell. Similarly, Blackfoot scholar Leroy Little Bear (2000) describes the incongruency of western and Indigenous worldviews, as 'jagged worldviews colliding' and that they are not wholly separate since the time of colonisation, but co-existing in a state of constant negotiation and sense-making within us.

Story as Intergenerational Relationship

If it is important in our storytelling to seek out better relations across divides, it is important to bear in mind that we do this, not by replacing or substituting what we feel as a cultural lack from minoritized or endangered communities. The task, instead, is to reconnect with the roots of one's culture and ground one's self in what these traditions and ancestral practices confer. In a sense, this means committing to becoming a tradition bearer. To say, whatever else I am, as a member of my community I commit to carry stories that tell where we have been, what we have found worthwhile along the way to those who come next. From this reassessment can come better relations with other traditions.

Whilst parents need the confidence and will to carve out a time for these stories only we can pass on, stories of our place, our time as well as what heritage from our cultural roots that we can pass on, there is also a need for reflection so that we sieve through and take seriously the possibility of passing on intergenerational trauma. It is important to critically reassess stories that have a tendency to black and white, (good [helpless] princess vs evil step mother). This separation into us/them, good/bad creates a dangerous frame through which to see the world. A reading of creation stories that encourage a view of the world through the lens of failure, scarcity, and condemnation, also perpetuates a dangerous world view.

If we take responsibility for our creativity, we need also to look at how creativity and creation is framed. We all live in a sphere where some creation stories have more dominance than others. If you have a story where you're cast out of the Garden of Eden and women are connected to the original sin, there's a frame of right and wrong that creates a fear-based way of living. You live very differently if your story is about order and chaos, and that both are important and needed in order for the world to survive. Then your frame is the need to balance both and neither is to be feared. You consider those relationships differently.

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With this different frame, our understanding of the characters within stories, the kinds of stories we gravitate to, and allow to be told through us, changes. The wolf or the coyote, he's a trickster, but he's your uncle and you love him. So you don't fear him, you learn from him. It is better to seek balance, as we navigate complex interactions, than to categorize things as good and bad. But we need time to hear our own stories if we're to become better at picking out the distortion.

The ability to critically evaluate the sources of stories has become an imperative literacy. With the prevalence and consumption of media - almost a constant bombardment - consumers of stories are continually filtering information from a variety of sources. The advancements of technology provide targeted media, and personalisation of content adds to the echo-chamber effect (Davis and Francis, 2022) of what stories we hear throughout our days. Media is our most overbearing storyteller. We need to be cautious of what we take from these stories. In many ways, media is as far removed from Indigenous storytelling practices and protocols as stories can get. The who, where, why, and authority to tell the story are removed. The stories become dangerous and disembodied. Some worldviews are privileged and others are occluded and silenced. As Gersie and King caution, becoming wrapped up in these pseudo replicant conversations can dim the inner eye:

> When the inner eye is closed we lose the capacity to generate dreams, ideas and visions: our ability to imagine begins to atrophy. We become receptacles and reproducers, deprived of contact with our original and unique voice. (1990:23)

Our focus in the day-to-day has become increasingly myopic and egocentric. We have so many perceived choices that we get bogged down in our own mundane story: what we spend our time doing each day - what we eat, where we go, what we view. We make countless choices and evaluations of our experiences, provide photographic or video documentation, and offer ratings based on our personal tastes, interests, and experiences. How we story our lives has become isolating in every way, under the guise of connecting us with friends, with fans, with community. Our lives are curated and documented, and no longer lived and enjoyed - no longer truly shared with others. To see light and hope, we can return to the wisdom of Thomas King, who states, 'Want a different ethic? Tell a different story' (2003, p. 164).

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Story and Trauma

Ben Okri (1996) has observed that unhealthy societies can only bear to tell themselves happy stories, whilst healthy communities value and attend to sad stories. Often in schools, and other areas of work, professionals are cautioned against telling stories that are too upsetting. This is another way that stories are stripped of their power, and perhaps their reason for being. We need stories to grieve, stories that wrestle with power and stories that create a path to make amends.

If we must die before our children are grown, what is the one thing, the most precious useful thing, we could leave behind? More important than any other may be a story; a story of a child who survives the loss of their parent and, through help, fantastical and practical, through remaining true to the lessons of kindness taught them, not only survives but thrives. To have such a companion in your thoughts should you face the same terrible juncture, surely is invaluable. Another way to look at this issue is to ask, would we like them to confront these issues without any stories, without the faintest pattern that may play some role in making sense of them? These stories, cataclysmic though they may be, have the capacity to transform all other resources and one's sense of place and purpose.

Some would airbrush the blood out of stories. Yet conflict resolution cannot be explored without engagement with conflict. Letting ourselves explore, not just the shallows but the depths, is perhaps some of the most healing work our psyches undergo in stories. Stories often show us the underbelly of tyrants, and the temptation to the tyrannical in ourselves.

It is also important to remember that, in part, stories of loss are stories that can decentre us. This decentering can play a crucial role in coming into better balance with those we share this world with. Dominant cultures urgently need to remember/learn another way of relating. Grieving is a crucial part of this. It is in stories of grief that the characters come to acknowledge they are not the only ones who have ever suffered like this; this is not the only time there has been suffering. Stories of loss take us on this journey of acknowledgement that can deepen the capacity for compassion.

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Telling it Forward

In wrapping up, we want to pay it forward, or in the currency of story, tell it forward. For a moment, let us look again at the shadows we started by facing the story-twisting that has been industrialised on social media platforms, and the power they seem to yield. Do they do so because we don't feel that our stories have value in the world, or don't have a place to be told? As Social Pedagogy's practice of Common Third (Pedagogy for Change, 2021) recommends, this can change by a simple reassessment of how we share time. Shared walks, shared baking, shared making of any kind can become a time to slow, sense and see what story wants to come out to play. The warmth of a shared story is unlike anything social media conveys. The re-emergence of stories that nourish are only a walk away. Take a friend. It only takes each of us to weave a blanket with room for all – a very different blanket than the coverage of social media.

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Recommended Resources

Books to Build On: Indigenous Literatures for Learning: https://werklund.ucalgary.ca/teaching-learning/indigenous-literatures-learning

Gesturing Towards Decolonising Futures: https://decolonialfutures.net/

Gypsy Roma Travellers in Scotland: https://www.grthm.scot/grts-in-scotlandShatt D and Patrick R (2021) Story Listening and Experience in Early Childhood, Palgrave and MacMillan

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