

Speaking From the Heart: Everyday Storytelling and Adult Learning

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This article relates the experiences of the author, an adult educator who facilitates workshops in the area of Indigenous women's healing and recovery. It demonstrates how educators can make use of everyday storytelling to engage workshop participants in educational experiences about decolonization. The author looks at some of the pitfalls of group discussion in an environment where people are either censured or encouraged to keep retelling/reliving their traumatic stories. She proposes that everyday storytelling, when guided and done in the context of colonial and precolonial history, will assist Indigenous people to move forward in their healing.

I have heard Elders say that each of us comes to this existence with a special gift that we are intended to share with others. If we are lucky, we understand and realize ourselves at an early age. Our purpose becomes clear and we can then go about our work in a straightforward manner. Sometimes we are given an Indian name that helps us to understand who we are and what we have to do while we are here. For many of us, however, this purpose—our truth—only becomes clear when we are well into our adult years.

After working as a writer and an adult educator for 15 years, I have recently arrived at a new understanding of my work as it relates to my purpose. That is, I have started to think of myself as a storyteller and a story facilitator. I never would have dared to call myself a storyteller in the past. Storytellers to me were only those people who carry a rich body of cultural knowledge that they impart through the traditional stories of our peoples. But there are many kinds of stories and many ways of telling them. This article is about how I use stories to assist Native adults to move forward in their personal growth and to advance the collective development of our peoples. I do this through working as a facilitator with small groups.

Calling on the Stories

My shift in consciousness about storytelling/facilitating began a few years ago when I was invited to give a keynote address at the Ojibway Cultural Foundation on Manitoulin Island. It was International Women's Day and they wanted me to talk about Native women's issues. I am not particularly comfortable with public speaking, but I always try to respond to an invitation. I figure if someone wants me to come and share what I know, I should make the effort to be there.

I took a friend along with me on that engagement, an "auntie" who used to go on road trips with me. I remember spending time at the desk in our bed-and-breakfast room, struggling to make point-form notes that I could use for my speech the following day. "Just speak from the heart," she told me. She looked so relaxed, stretched out on the bed and flipping through a book she had found in one of the nooks. But I was feeling inadequate: What could I say that people did not already know? How could I fulfill the expectations of a keynote address? I felt a duty to honor the women, the day, and the invitation.

The next day inevitably arrived, and so did my time to speak. Everyone was warm and welcoming, but I could not shake my feelings of anxiety. I was to present in a large room, around which they had arranged the chairs in a semicircle. There were probably about 80 people assembled, and most were older Native women. I felt unsettled because I know I am most successful as a facilitator when I can plug in to the energy of the room and the people who are present. I can feel it when we are connected. But I felt lost as I stood up at the front that day. A shiny floor distanced me from the women like a sea that I had to shout across to be heard.

I began to give my speech about the losses our women have experienced through colonization: politically, economically, and spiritually. I talked about the disempowerment we have experienced in the areas of family life, sex, and sexuality. But as I moved along through my material, I had this sinking feeling that I was losing everyone. The energy of the room was slipping from underneath me and disappearing into that linoleum hole between us. This did not help with my feelings of inadequacy! Halfway through, I started to question myself: Who am I to be up here talking about the losses women have experienced through the residential school system? through the Indian Act and band politics? through the imposition of patriarchal household authority? After all, these women have lived every one of these experiences. I am not sure if the crowd perceived it as I did, but I felt as if I had not done the invitation justice. I felt unable to convey my message about our women's history, muddled as I was.

As is usual for me, I spent some time reflecting after that engagement, trying to determine what I could have done better. I concluded that if the women in that circle had lived the experiences that I was talking about, it would make sense that they tell the story. I decided that I did not want to lecture in Native community settings henceforth. Rather, I would find ways to facilitate the stories of others through participatory workshops.

Not long after this experience I had a call from a community-based educator who wanted to know if I had a simple way of explaining that five-syllable word *colonization*. We hear a lot about colonization, but what does it mean? I could not come up with a concise explanation for the word. I suggested instead that she try working with the experiences of the people

in her sessions. We can understand colonization better if we ask, "What does it mean in our daily lives?" because the answers to complex questions about our development as peoples are in our stories. In telling about our experiences as Native people, we can begin to understand the process and effect of colonization. We can begin to tell our untold histories and define what colonization has meant to us. And if storytelling among our people has always been a form of education, then our job as adult educators is to create forums and processes where these stories can be told. Further to that, we have to contextualize the stories so that the multigenerational, national, and international implications become clear.

The Women's Story

I have been doing workshops lately on "The Colonization of Native Womanhood." I begin by offering a framework of what happened to our women throughout colonial history. I talk about the balance that we once had in which men and women worked together for the well-being of the community. The work that women did such as farming, preparing meats, or tanning hides was valued because it was clearly critical to our survival. I remind the women that we also had political authority through our various systems of governance. Our peoples built these systems because they understood that women would make decisions in the best interests of the children and the future. I give examples of our spiritual authority: of the power of women doctors and medicine people, the gender balance that is built into our ceremonies, and the affirmation of women through our female-centered creation stories. I point out that we also used to have extensive knowledge about our bodies, and we had sexual authority because there were no double standards between men and women. In our family lives there was no such thing as a single mom living in poverty or a battered woman trapped by the nuclear family unit. Women and children were protected from neglect or abuse through the extended family, and men who exhibited deviant behavior were quickly cast out. I say all this to demonstrate that although our many nations across Turtle Island are so different, they all once shared some fundamental principles that granted women equity, authority, and respect.¹

After giving this overview I ask workshop participants to speak, write, or draw about how these experiences have played themselves out in their personal lives. I try to make connections between the women's stories of violence and abuse to historic and ongoing dispossession from the land, to residential school interference, to the imposition of patriarchal family and political structures. Stories involving the child welfare system, as told by adoptees or women who have lost their children, can be linked to any number of events in our colonial history including the introduction of the Indian Act and the deliberate dismantling of the extended family structure. All the injustices that we may speak of or that outsiders might

hear of through the appalling statistics about Native people can be mapped out in this way.

Sometimes I ask participants to put their work from our colonization sessions on the wall, thereby making galleries out of our stories. Sometimes we put them all together on a long mural that maps out the experiences of Native women through various life stages, or through various elements of our lives: economic, social, spiritual, political, sexual, and so on. Sometimes we do body sculptures to represent these experiences. I see this as important work in terms of documenting our stories, because we need to educate ourselves and others about how we live these colonial histories in our everyday present. It is a telling that can counteract ignorant and popular notions like (and I paraphrase): "What are all you Indians whining about? Colonization is a thing of the past. Just get over it and get on with your lives." Storytelling in a group allows us to clarify what has never been taught in our grade school history books.

Once we have done this work on our past, we need to turn to the future. Healthy, future-oriented stories are critical to our development as individuals and as peoples. Just as the creation stories carry within them all the philosophies and values of our nations, modern-day storytelling can help us transform our individual and collective experiences to create a new world. In recognition of this I usually ask people to envision where we are going in the future; to create the visionary stories that we need to move us forward while bringing us back to those times of balance in our nations. Regarding the colonization of our womanhood, what types of systems and values do we need to reintroduce, and how is this critical to the health of our families, nations, and the environment? The women often begin to articulate how they need to speak out, get active, and work together.²

Vulnerability and the Pitfalls of Endless Story

It is important to have the future-oriented stories because we can get trapped in our negative experiences and in the telling. I think this may be the result of the strides we have made in the area of healing. Through various types of therapy and treatment, many of our people have become accustomed to sitting in talking circles and relaying their traumatic histories. This is fundamentally important work because it breaks the silence about abuses and allows people to tell of their experiences and let go of the shame. Telling is a critical part of the healing journey. As peoples we must also keep telling stories about sexual and other abuses because they remind us of the ongoing injustices that are happening to our children, women, and men. But sometimes we get stuck, telling the same stories over and over again. Sometimes it is the only thing we know how to do. And sometimes these stories can eat up a workshop when the time could be better spent contextualizing our past and envisioning where we want to

go in the future. This is where we need to apply our skills as Native adult educators.

I have struggled with this "healing circle syndrome" in my work. I once ran a workshop where it took us almost a whole day to get through our introductions and the first exercise! I felt a duty to move the agenda forward, but did not want to silence anyone by cutting them short. After letting them talk without interruption, I wondered if I was doing a service to the group. At the end of the day, the more vocal members of the group complained that I did not bring closure to the issues.

If I were to do that day over again, I would try to avoid sliding into the healing circle syndrome by making it clear that I am an educator, not a healer. I would make the timelines and learning objectives clear, and I would use more small-group work, work in pairs, or individual reflection time. All these things would make more space for the quiet people and limit the long storytellers. I would also tell the group up front that a workshop is what they make of it. That way the group can take more responsibility for what happens.

Personal storytelling can also be problematic because people may become emotionally vulnerable. One has to assess the situation and the supports available and be aware of where the group or individual members may be taking the workshop. I have been most comfortable doing intense types of storytelling sessions at conferences or in settings where there are Elders, counselors, and healers on hand to help those who become emotionally or spiritually triggered by the material. I also often give workshops that are part of an ongoing women's program or group where these supports are built in. These situations are ideal because the women can work together as a group over a longer period, strengthening themselves by using various methods including traditional healing, art and music therapy, writing, theater, and one-on-one counseling.

Ultimately, my goal as a facilitator is to ensure that people feel they have something worthwhile to say and to build the educational framework whereby people will listen. A skilled facilitator can make everyone in the group know they bring something valuable to the circle. He or she will look for ways to balance the long storytellers with those who are not comfortable talking in a group. He or she can also think of ways to balance the need to tell stories with the objectives of the day, session, or course. And if he or she can build a framework for the personal stories that offers insight into the past and an opportunity to envision the future, the learning can be transformational.

Finding Voice For My Own Story

My ongoing work in group-based storytelling and learning has thus brought me to where I understand myself as a story facilitator. But in encouraging people to tell their stories, I have slowly come to validate myself as a storyteller as well. For if I tell workshop participants that

whatever they have to say is part of the larger story of our peoples, then my story has a place there too. This is an important breakthrough for me: an indication of how far I have come on my identity journey and my self-confidence.

Thinking back to that speaking engagement for International Women's Day and my subsequent resolve to refrain from speaking in Native settings, I am reminded of a conversation I had with another Native female educator. This woman had been going into public schools to present on Native culture and had gradually been invited to speak at non-Native gatherings. After a time she began to receive invitations to Native gatherings as well, which made her extremely nervous. We laughed when we came to the conclusion that we shared the same sense of confidence in addressing crowds of children or white people, but felt inadequate when addressing Native adults. Why was that?

I think it has to do with cultural genocide. We have come through a long period in our history where we were told that anything we had to say was not worthwhile. The dominant culture stripped away our teachings, denied our histories, and told us to shut up if we contested the false things that were being taught about our peoples. Children were beaten for speaking their languages in residential schools and returned to their homes unable to communicate with their families. As a result of this history, an essential part of reclaiming ourselves and our nations has been to develop our ability to speak again: to get over the don't-talk rule that has been instilled into us for centuries. But in so doing, I think we have created other types of silencing mechanisms in our own communities.

In our fervor to revive our cultures and identities, we have created expectations that verge on censorship about who can say what. We have created hierarchies of who is more Indian, who is more traditional, and so on. So if we are speaking about Native issues and Native culture, there are surely some who can discredit us by virtue of their age or experience, their ability with the language, or other indicators of cultural fluency. This can be intimidating to those of us who have grown up distanced from our cultures and ways. It can be intimidating to any young person, and I can imagine it can be really intimidating to older people who feel a need to meet some kind of expectation related to "the wise Elder" that they cannot fulfill. So many of us got lost or went into hiding during those years of cultural genocide, assimilation, disenfranchisement, internal racism, involuntary urbanization, and the adoption scoop. Where is the space for us to offer our perspectives and to voice the future?

As I have begun to understand this about my own history, my family history, and how it fits in to colonial and women's history, I have become more confident in telling my story. I am confident in offering my vision and can defend myself from outside attacks and inner self-doubt about my legitimacy as a Native person with something to offer to future genera-

tions. And I realize now that part of my anxiety and discomfort in getting up in front of a crowd of Native people to talk about our cultures has been that ongoing struggle to accredit my personal history as a Native story.

I am a mixed-blood person who grew up in a white middle-class neighborhood outside Ottawa. I spent the first 20 years of my life deprived of a Native community and of the Indigenous knowledge that is my birthright. I was born into this position—a position of both privilege and dispossession—as a result of decisions my parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents made. But they did not make these decisions in a vacuum. There were policies that encouraged urbanization coupled with a lack of opportunities for education. Poverty, fear, racism, and wanting a good life for their children were other factors that pushed us to the margins of our Native world. My grandpa encouraged his children to claim they were Scottish. He wanted them to succeed through the mainstream educational system. I imagine, like any parent, he did not want to see his children suffer, and I suppose this was his way of ensuring their well-being. But as much as it may have allowed us to accumulate certain successes in the mainstream, it has left us with another kind of poverty.

I know that many of our people share variations of this same story; that in fact this is one of the major Native stories of the 20th century. Talking and writing about it can be liberating to those of us who have lived it and educational to those who have been touched by colonization in other ways.

So I have rethought my resolve to not lecture at Native gatherings. I go back to my friend's words on that trip to Manitoulin Island a few years ago. Speaking engagements can be an opportunity to speak from the heart and tell my chapter of the larger story. This is time well spent with our Elders and our relations who have stayed closer to the fire, because it gives voice to the lost grandchildren who are trying to find their way home.

This being said, I still prefer to facilitate workshops because they allow for a balance between storytelling and story facilitating. I can call on my own history and vision as a way of opening other people up to the process. As a workshop facilitator I continually learn new ways to draw on our peoples' experiences; to bring in everyone in to the wheel so we can collectively envision the kind of home we are building for the future.

Notes

¹In the workshops I provide more extensive examples that are specific to various nations. I draw these examples out of my book *A Recognition of Being: Reconstructing Native Womanhood*, (2000, Toronto, ON: Sumach Press).

²Unfortunately, most of my workshops are limited to one or two days, and the women often come from various communities. It would be interesting to see how this process might work over the long term as a community development process.