The art of storytelling is traced from its roots in indigenous cultural societies. Storytelling in education is described as a participatory learning process that promotes community and understanding.

What Our Ancestors Knew: Teaching and Learning Through Storytelling

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After Tabaldak (Creator) had finished making human beings, he dusted his hands off and some of that dust sprinkled on the earth. From that dust Gluscabi formed himself (Caduto & Bruchac, 1988, p. 21)

His head was closed. He could see, hear and sense nothing. Tabaldak, the Creator, made the lightning strike seven times. The first double strike of lightning produced two ears. Thus, Gluscabi could hear on both sides. The second double strike made two eyes; thus, Gluscabi could see far and near with much depth and detail. The third double strike made two nostrils; thus, Gluscabi could smell that which was sweet and that which was sour. The last, seventh single strike of lightening made one mouth for only one mouth was needed. For all of us like Gluscabi should speak only half as much as we listen, half as much as we observe, and half as much as we smell the world around us. Listen, listen. Listen . . . (Adapted from “The Coming of Gluscabi,” Caduto & Bruchac, 1988)

Storytelling among ancient peoples has historically served two primary functions: to entertain and to teach people how to become better human beings. One received the proper guidance of how to act with a nurturing sense of reflection, balance, and wholeness by listening to wise experienced elders speak of the challenges of living. This traditional Abenaki story teaches about the importance of listening.

Our lives are composed of stories, which continue to accumulate as we mature. Furthermore, we often equate wisdom with age; perhaps this is because the older we are the more enduring lived experiences we have. We share these experiences through stories. Telling stories is a way to make sense of our own experience and to communicate that experience to others. As Stone
(1996, p. 3) relates: “Telling a story ... may be one of the most personal and intimate things we can do. Through storytelling we can come to know who we are in new and unforeseen ways. We can also reveal to others what is deepest in our hearts, in the process, building bridges.”

Although our fast-paced electronic society doesn’t always nurture the art of storytelling, telling our stories can be an empowering remedy for healing alienation. Instead of humanizing technologies while we dehumanize ourselves, storytelling embraces the very essence of person-to-person communication, weaving a sense of personal and collective welfare with the community and the universe as a whole. This chapter explains how storytelling evolved in ancient times and then explores the meaning and richness of storytelling in contemporary adult education settings.

### The Roots of Storytelling

Storytelling has been a part of all indigenous cultures since the first humans inhabited the earth. Whether depicting dangerous predators on a cave wall in order to instill courage and empowerment during the hunt for a potentially dangerous animal or gathering loved ones around a comforting fire under a new moon to share a story of communal connectedness, storytelling covers a broad range of life-affirming, time-tested lessons. Native traditions in North America, for example, view the natural world as home. It was and still is understood that no matter where a people moved they did not leave the earth behind. With a deep appreciation for such wisdom, stories conveyed a powerful message about treating the earth like a grand home with infinite varieties of beings that guided and challenged the young in becoming a part of the greater circle of life. Such a heartfelt journey enlivens the senses so that in Joseph Campbell’s words “our life experiences on the purely physical plane will have resonances within our innermost being and reality, so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive” (Campbell, 1988, p. 3).

Indigenous peoples in the temperate and colder climates held a deep respect for the cyclical patterns of the four seasons. Therefore, stories were told between the first and last frost. The first sound of thunder in the spring meant that it was the end of the season for telling stories. In places where frost did not occur, storytelling had to cease as soon as the seeds were planted. According to Native traditions, part of the reason for not telling stories during the growing season when plant people and animal people are most active was the belief that stories could emit harmful consequences. For example, animals who may hear and be forewarned by the stories could outwit human hunters and simply disappear forever from the places where humans could find them. The consequences led many native traditions to believe that such disrespect could result in famine, disease, or excessive hardship (Bruchac, 1996).

Stories told with seasonal intent and a teachable message were acknowledged with offerings of sacred herbs such as sage, sweetgrass, tobacco, or cedar before being introduced to the listeners. They were considered to be a sacred
link to an ever continuing process of life and death, honoring all the relations that make up who we are as human beings.

On a practical level, traditional stories were told during winter to help people endure the long season of cold snowy short days and long nights. Sitting around a warm fire at night with a good story helped conjure an inner awareness to foster a creative connection to the dream world where the stories continued to shift and transform.

**Preserving Culture Through Oral History**

Stories have been handed down over many generations through oral history and preserved as a survival tool for the people as a collective treasured experience. Thus, it is important to begin by treating stories with respect. This respect acknowledges storytellers as bearers of tradition and representatives of a particular indigenous culture. To the indigenous peoples of North America, the stories are not just about human beings but also beings such as plants, wildlife, rocks, thunder, water, wind, and sun, which are all considered to be as alive as the breath that carries them from one person to another. Everything has an essence in the daily world of nature; thus, everything has a story to reflect a part of the earth and sky.

The stories of many indigenous cultures are absent from our history books. Oral history is a way to keep these stories alive while challenging the dominant discourse that privileges white male western culture. For example, since the arrival of the first Europeans on the shores of New England, Native peoples under the *Doctrine of Discovery* were forced to adapt and change in response to the pressure of an expanding population of settlers (Bruchac, 1996). As a result of this legal fictionalized notion by Europeans to justify the idea that the title to lands in the Americas belonged to the European nations that “discovered,” claimed, or conquered them, many of the old and cherished traditions and rituals that included stories, songs, and dances were lost or cast aside. It is within this context that Underwood (1993) sought to revive five generations of Oneida stories, retelling a long-held animistic version of a 10,000-year period of how her people came to this land. Indigenous Africans and Caribbeans have preserved and transmitted stories in a similar oral tradition (Omolewa, 2007; Zobel Marshall, 2012).

Whether told in a traditional way, drawn on a rock, carved in great detail on totem poles, or painted inside a cave or on an animal skin, these preserved examples of storytelling are keys to linking the past and present to a wiser future. It is within these stories that indigenous histories come to life describing the turbulent centuries of tribal battles, disease, oppression, broken treaties, and undermined kinship ties with nature, as well as remembering the countless blessings of living with a sense of love and balance for the earth and all the beautiful joys that this living planet provides. “And that’s the purpose of storytelling: teaching people who they are so they can become all they were meant to be” (Bruchac, 1996, p. 75).
Stories Help Us to Understand Ourselves and Others

In today’s world we tell stories to connect with others and find meaning in our individual and shared experiences. Stories are not literal accounts of an event as much as the meaning we make of our experience (Baldwin, 2005; Rossiter & Clark, 2007). This is not a linear process (Tyler, 2009). We tell stories based on our memories of an experience, selectively choosing what parts to tell and what parts to leave out. The stories are always filtered through our own perspective, so two people living through the same experience will tell different stories. Each time we retell the story it takes on a new form and meaning. As Stone (1996) expresses: “Each time we journey inward and trace the path of a memory to its origins, we seem to discover nuances and connections that previously went unnoticed” (p. 20).

As our ancestors knew, storytelling is a holistic process that engages the heart, body, and spirit along with the mind. Telling our stories is one way of making sense of our own experiences. Listening to others’ stories also helps us to understand ourselves as we identify with their experiences. On the other hand, listening to stories around difference helps to promote empathy and understanding, particularly between people of different cultures. It broadens our knowledge. Storytelling has the power to disrupt stereotypes. It is difficult to judge a person by his or her cultural membership once you have heard his or her story. For example, Aziza, a Palestinian student in one of Randee’s adult learning classes, told a story about being racially profiled at the airport and harassed for wearing a hijab. Although the other students had read about the impact of racial profiling since the 9/11 terrorist attacks, they could not fully understand the experience until Aziza told her story. This was not something happening “out there”; it was the story of someone they knew and liked. Rossiter and Clark (2007) suggest that stories can promote transformative learning as they “have the capacity to change the listener or the reader, to lead us to new insights and expanded perspectives” (p. 72).

Teaching and Learning Through Stories

The elements of a great story are imagination, believability, and content. In terms of the content, it’s all about the problem, resolution, and moral of the story. Moreover, a well-told story of the distant past can illustrate the value and importance of the myths we invent and how they serve to hold cultures together and empower individuals to build their lives around these experiences. Underwood (1993) uses stories as a teachable way of conveying a particular theme, allowing the listener or reader to draw his or her own conclusions.

Storytelling is a natural and organic aspect of adult education as it taps into the experience of the learners. “The eliciting of personal stories makes the curriculum content more, real, more immediate, and more personal” (Rossiter
Furthermore, storytelling is a collaborative nonhierarchical process that involves the learners as active agents in the learning process rather than as passive receivers.

Experiential learning is one of the major theories of learning in adult education. One component of experiential learning is making linkages between new learning and prior experience (Tennant & Pogson, 1995). Telling stories helps us to make these connections. A theory is no longer something in the abstract; we make sense of it through our stories. Telling or writing down our story is one way to make these connections. Sharing our stories in dialogue with others helps us to understand the concepts at a deeper level. Telling stories often elicits stories from others (Tyler, 2009). In time, a collaborative story may even emerge. For example, telling collective stories of environmental sustainability could facilitate a future more in balance with nature.

**Inviting Stories**

Storytelling often occurs spontaneously in the adult education classroom. Both teachers and students might tell stories to illustrate a point they are trying to make. Stories can also be invited. The critical incident approach is one way of inviting stories. Examples of critical incidents include: “Talk about an experience outside of your formal education where you learned something important. What made that experience so valuable?” or “Talk about a time when you experienced a major life transition. What was happening at this time in your life?”

Tyler (2009) cautions that personal storytelling can be a risky business that leaves one vulnerable. The first example is fairly low risk. Most people are happy to talk about a positive learning experience. The second example calls for a level of self-disclosure that may not be comfortable for some. Attention to the environment is critical at this juncture. An atmosphere of trust needs to be established where people feel safe in sharing with one another. Telling stories in pairs or small groups is less risky than in larger groups. Furthermore, although stories can be invited, they should never be mandated.

Baldwin (2005, p. 94) offers several prompts that can be used as story starters: “Describe a world event that changed you. How did the world look to you before it happened? How did the world look to you after it happened?” She also encourages people to use all of their senses to recall sounds, smells, images, and emotions associated with the event.

In conducting storytelling workshops, Dennis taps into people’s personal experiences with nature, in these informal adult education programs he invites participants to recall a special naturally wild place outdoors that feels like home and then to tell a story about this place, asking questions such as “How does this activity deepen and broaden your understanding of yourself and the earth?” One may not have any past history in a particular area and yet
be drawn to this personal power spot like a great mysterious calling. Feelings and experiences matter in nurturing good stories.

Tyler (2009) uses stories in classrooms and organizations to promote dialogue rather than debate when tensions are high and divergent views appear to divide the group. This process allows people to slow down, reflect on the situation, and bring things more into focus.

Life history is another way of using stories of personal experience to understand self and others. Life history is a form of narrative storytelling combined with reflection and analysis to uncover and re(discover) the meaning of one’s experience (Lawrence, 2002). Randee uses this approach with master’s students as a way to connect theories of adult learning with prior experience and with doctoral students as an approach to reflect on their learning journey at the start of their educational program. The doctoral students come into their initial 2-week residence with a draft of a written narrative of their life history. They meet in small groups with two or three other students and orally tell their stories rather than reading from their papers. Students frequently go beyond what is in their papers in these storytelling sessions. These sessions are often very powerful as students share experiences of deep meaning. There is also more passion in oral narratives than the written word as voice inflection and nonverbal communication is possible, similar to the difference between reading a poem and hearing it read aloud by the poet.

In group storytelling the role of the listener is just as important as the role of the teller. Listeners need to give the storyteller their full attention without interrupting. There is a temptation when hearing a story to add a story of one’s own. This takes the focus away from the storyteller. Listening with intent to hear and understand can involve nonverbal or verbal encouragement. Any questions should be for clarification purposes or to help the storyteller to expand on his or her main points, not to take the storyteller into a different direction. Feedback after the storytelling session is helpful. Tyler (2009) advocates facilitating dialogue after storytelling to give both speakers and listeners a chance to talk about their experience.

Stories as a Way of Exploring Alternative Realities

Storytelling can be a form of resistance and a way of challenging the dominant paradigm that privileges some and oppresses others. Zobel Marshall (2012), for example, uses the traditional stories of Anansi the spider as a form of cultural resistance in Jamaica. Counter-storytelling (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) is rooted in critical race theory as a way of challenging master narratives that oppress and marginalize. These counter-stories are based on the lived experience of people of color and tell a different story that helps us to “understand and transform established belief systems” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 36). Aziza’s story is an example of a counter-story as it challenges the master narrative of Muslims in the United States as terrorists.
Oppression can be painful and difficult to discuss. Butterwick and Lawrence (2009) describe how popular theatre can be a way for people to “tell” their stories of oppression through dramatization. “Embodied practice taps into knowing that is not yet available to us at a conscious level” (p. 36). Once the knowledge is surfaced it can be communicated to others in ways that tap into emotions. One can then performatively explore alternative realities that counter the oppression, which in turn opens the door for talking about this difficult subject matter.

**Visual and Embodied Storytelling**

Storytelling need not be a strictly oral process as seen in the previous example. Just as our ancestors created stories on skins and on rock walls, we can tell our stories in visual or embodied ways. Artistic expression can unlock a part of the brain where stories reside but are not in our immediate conscious awareness. Snowber (2012) uses dance as a method of inquiry with her students. “Dance has the capacity to be the muscle of imagination, a magical invitation through the creative process to reimagine new worlds...we can dance our stories” (p. 56). Through dancing our stories we become more aware of not only ourselves but also the world around us.

Ethnodrama (Saldaña, 2005) is a form of performative storytelling that emerges from research data, often as a way of making space for marginalized voices to be heard. Stories can also originate from autoethnographic monologues. Saldaña teaches this method of storytelling by encouraging people to tell a personal story to a partner based on a series of prompts such as “Talk about an encounter with someone who called you a name that offended you” or “Tell a story about the first time you became aware of your race or ethnicity” (Saldaña, personal communication, 2008). Participants tell their story for about 3 or 4 minutes and then receive feedback from their partner. They tell the story two more times with different partners, each time providing more sensory detail and finally focusing on a beginning, middle, and end to the story. The stories are eventually performed by others, offering the storyteller a mirror image of his or her experience, thus providing new insights into the story.

In a similar vein Goodman, Ellinger, and Mount (2014) use a process called “fluid sculpture,” which focuses on transformative learning experiences. Participants tell a story about a transformative learning experience using colored pencils to draw their emotions associated with the experience. Other participants, as actors, portray the emotions associated with the story and create a visual sculpture. Seeing one’s story played out in this way assists the original storyteller in finding new meaning in his or her experience.

Visual art is a great way to engage in storytelling in the adult learning classroom. In a class on adult development Randee asks the students to draw themselves engaged in activities that occupied them in each decade of life. It’s
not about artistic ability. Some draw stick figures. Drawing often shakes loose long forgotten memories. Seeing themselves on paper helps them to create stories of their development over the life span. Collage is another way of telling stories as participants piece together found images to tell their stories. They can also collect photographs from different time periods or take photos to tell a compelling story.

**Embracing Technology**

Although storytelling is an ancient art that predates computers, television, radio, and even spoken language, these forms of communication have not replaced storytelling. Instead technology has opened up new ways to tell and communicate our stories. Digital storytelling combines visual images including drawings, photographs, or video images with a voice track and or music to tell a story. This multimedia approach is a powerful way to tell our stories that not only reaches people in the same room but can also be communicated to others at a distance. Brendel, Chou, and Bowman (2014) engage in collaborative digital storytelling in organizations focused on change. They start with individual stories about the organization and then collectively revise and reimagine the story in new ways.

As discussed previously, storytelling can be a way of healing alienation. Technology presents us with a double-edged sword. When we see people ignoring those in the same room while totally engrossed in their smartphones we wonder about future generations. Will there come a time when normal human communication becomes obsolete? If we are intentional with how we use technology we can use the very tools that alienate us to bring us together.

As technology continues to evolve, storytelling can play a larger role in not only communicating our stories but to assist in creating collaborative stories to envision positive change.

**Conclusion and Implications**

This chapter started with a discussion of how storytelling was used in ancient times to transmit cultural knowledge and to create community. Storytelling is a time-honored art that has survived for generations and made its way into formal and informal adult education today. Storytelling is a collaborative, inclusive, and participatory way of creating and sharing knowledge.

What is the future of storytelling in adult education? Can it survive our fast-paced global society, with its explosion of knowledge and increasing reliance on technology? We believe that storytelling is a critical link to a sustainable society. Storytelling is ingrained in indigenous cultures. It is how education happens. In formal adult education settings from the boardroom to the classroom, storytelling may have to be nurtured. Although sitting around a campfire sharing a mug of warm tea may not be practical, educators can create a welcoming space such as a circle of chairs with laptops and cell
phones stashed away so that full attention can be devoted to listening to and telling stories. Stories can connect those at a distance through Skype and web-conferencing.

Storytelling preserves the best of adult education. We are all born with the innate ability to tell stories. Each of our lives is filled with a rich treasure of life experiences and life stories. We each carry like seeds a great many untold stories of who we are, where we came from, and what we are capable of enduring through our personal journeys. Through nurturing the art of storytelling, this seed of life can germinate and mature into an awakening of the heart, mind, and wiser emotional self. Storytelling is a gift that opens a path toward a greater good for all to share.

References


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