Storytelling

From the days of our distant past to the present day, human societies have always engaged in storytelling. Stories are unique to each culture and are filled with symbols, metaphors, and images that hold a particular meaning for that nation.Stories are told in many ways—orally, in song, in drumming, with pictographs and petroglyphs, through medicine wheels and tipi rings, and using other creative art forms. Stories are an expression of each nation's perceptions, attitudes, and interpretations of the world as they experience it. Storytelling moves the spirit and is a way of making meaning, of finding one's unique place in the world and making sense of the mysteries of life. Stories are a teaching tool; and for children and youth, listening to stories has been and continues to be a significant part of the learning process.

Storytelling is considered one of the earliest art forms and involves an oral sharing of personal and/or traditional stories. Storytellers are not merely entertainers; they are highly skilled professionals and teachers. Just as important as the content of the story is the way a storyteller tells a particular story, as this also expresses cultural customs, traditions, norms, gender roles, and humour. Storytelling is a holistic experience for both the storyteller and listeners, involving their minds, bodies, emotions, and spirits. The listeners' role requires full participation and higher-order thinking skills. Stories are to be patiently listened to, remembered, and reflected upon.

Stories often have many layers of meaning, and it is the listener's responsibility to find his or her own personal meaning in the story. In other words, there are as many interpretations of one story as there are listeners. Stories are not frivolous or meaningless or told without an intention or purpose. It is also valuable for listeners to hear a story more than once as a story is considered to be a living entity and often contains many truths. These truths reveal themselves according to time, place, and the listeners' readiness to receive those truths.

Not too long ago, all nations around the world relied on oral transmission and storytelling to pass on cultural knowledge. It is only relatively recently in human history that information began to be written down and recorded in books. Because of this new reliance on the written word, especially in western cultures, oral storytelling began to lose its value. Today, many people in western cultures consider stories to be 'books' or 'movies' to entertain children. Sadly, this one-sided, non-interactive way of telling stories teaches children to be passive listeners.

Aboriginal Storytelling

Like many other non-western cultures around the world, Indigenous cultures continue to be mainly oral with only a small portion of their histories, traditions, knowledge, and stories written down. Oral traditions are passed down from one generation to another; and stories, songs, dances, rituals, and ceremonies continue to be an essential means of expressing this knowledge.

Storytelling plays a vital role in binding a community together as well as educating children and youth in First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities. Traditionally, stories were told by Traditional Elders—as knowledge-keepers and historians—as well as community members who have earned the title of ‘Storyteller.’
There are many different kinds of stories—sacred stories, secret stories, legends, and men's and women's stories. Embedded in these stories are each nation's values, beliefs, life lessons, and information about particular traditions, ceremonies, rituals, and protocols. There are also restrictions on who can tell which particular story as well as appropriate times and places for telling stories. Sacred stories are told only by a certain person and permission is needed to share these stories.

Many stories describe a people's relationship with the land or explain the origins of sacred place names and landmarks. Some stories recount the great deeds of a community's heroes, providing positive role models for children to look up to and allowing them feel a sense of pride and confidence in their community.

Although the stories of each First Nations, Métis, and Inuit nation are distinct and unique, there are a few common characteristics. For example, each nation has its own origin or Creation story, which is thousands of years old and retold the same way at each telling. Creation stories describe the origins of each nation and embodies the spiritual connection between that nation, the land, and the rest of existence.

Each nation has their own cultural heroes. For example, Gwich'in have Atachuua; and the Southern Tutchone have “Ts'ürk'I” (Crow who made the world), Āsūya” (Smart Man or Beaver Man) and the Kaska have Tsá’eguyá tsá (cultural hero).

Another commonality is the character of 'Trickster,' who goes by many names, depending on the nation, and has the ability to transform himself into other creatures. You may have heard of him as Coyote, Raven, Wisakedjik, Weesakichak, Nanabozho, Naapi, or Nannabush. Using humour and a healthy dose of the unexpected, Trickster stories teach important life lessons to children and adults while also modelling cultural values like humility, honesty, courage, kindness, and respect for others. Within Aboriginal cultures, stories contain moral lessons and instructions on how to behave. As children grow, the stories often became more serious and contained spiritual teachings.

For over a century, residential schools interrupted the transmission of culture to children and youth. Many First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities have been re-establishing the use of storytelling as a means of restoring Aboriginal cultural practices, traditions, and history. The inter-generational transmission of knowledge through storytelling was, and continues to be, vital for cultural survival, and many nations around the world continue to practice their oral traditions to pass on valuable cultural knowledge.

**Storytelling in the Classroom**

As educators working in First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities across Canada, you are required to interact and communicate with many different groups of people. Incorporating Aboriginal ways of teaching, through storytelling, is one way of being culturally responsive. Traditional stories can be shared in the classroom by storytellers. However, when considering inviting a Storyteller to the classroom, requests should be made for age appropriate stories. When an educator invites a Traditional Elder to tell stories in the classroom, she or he must be knowledgeable about the request. Some stories must be told the same way each time to teach a specific lesson. If not, the story will lose meaning and the message will be lost. Stories may not always be age-appropriate. Check with a local Traditional Elder or community member to make sure you are following proper protocol. Another useful guide is the WNCP Common Tool for Assessing and Validating Teaching and Learning Resources for Cultural Appropriateness and Historical Accuracy of First Nations, Métis and Inuit Content.
Personal stories are another way of incorporating Aboriginal ways of teaching and learning in the classroom. Sharing your own personal stories with your students allows many of them to hear about a life that is different from their own. Students often respond by sharing their own stories. Over time, classrooms become a community of storytellers in which students can learn from each other. Allowing students to tell their personal stories in a safe and caring classroom environment helps build self-esteem. Many of the stories that we tell (and retell) about our lives enable us to reflect on significant moments that have marked us in some way. Stories celebrate each student’s distinctive voice and unique expression, as each student may tell the same story in a completely different and novel way. Storytelling acts as an exchange of cultural ideas. Personal storytelling promotes trust, relationship building, and equality by valuing all students as voices of experience.

Storytelling allows students to develop their active listening and critical thinking skills. These are skills that are not nurtured in front of a television. You probably have noticed that you already use storytelling in your classroom to highlight a particular point, even when teaching math and science. Using storytelling across all subject areas in this way helps students build conceptual bridges between their own experiences and new knowledge.

In Conclusion

Storytelling is a valuable and powerful teaching tool. Finding time for storytelling in the classroom can be difficult, especially when constantly pressured to increase students’ academic performance. In higher grade levels there is less and less storytelling incorporated into teaching and learning. However, thinking beyond the textbook and incorporating storytelling into your classrooms has many long-term benefits for all students.