

Lesson: Sharing Knowledge Through Stories

by Meredith Rusk

Summary:

This lesson corresponds with the poem “For My Nieces,” by Makayla Webkamigad, on page 6 of the publication *Truth Before Reconciliation: Listening to Survivors*.

This lesson explores the importance of listening to stories, the issues of appropriation of Indigenous stories, and the protocols around telling a story. Students will have an opportunity to explore and tell some Indigenous stories in a respectful way.

In this lesson students will:

- gain a deeper understanding of the ways Indigenous Peoples share knowledge through stories
- learn about protocols regarding the sharing of Indigenous stories
- better understand the concept of appropriation

Background information:

For Indigenous Peoples, stories have been a way of building relationships with all things since time immemorial. The themes within the stories inform Indigenous people about their cultural ways of being, their values, and how to live in a good way within the world. Stories educate the mind, body, and spirit. Stories are sacred and living processes that are passed from generation to generation. Stories can also be lived experiences with many being closer to the present, like the stories of Residential School Survivors.

It is important to keep cultural and emotional safety in mind when sharing some of the sensitive stories of Indigenous Peoples. Cultural safety is an approach that considers how social, cultural, and historical contexts and interpersonal power imbalances have existed and continue to shape educational experiences. It is important to demonstrate respect and be aware of stereotypes or misconceptions. Indigenous students should not be called upon to speak but rather should choose on their own whether they wish to share their knowledges and experiences. Allow students safe spaces if the stories are too sensitive for them.

Lesson:

1. Ask students: When a person is telling a story, why is it respectful to listen without interrupting? What makes a good story listener?

Explain that respectful story listeners:

- Understand that they have a responsibility to listen and learn, because a story is a gift that a storyteller has chosen to share.
 - Allow the person telling the story to do so without interruptions, which can make the person forget what they were saying and lose their flow.
 - Remain focused on the story without talking to the person beside them or looking around too much.
 - Listen with body language and brain, not just ears.
2. Have students work with a partner or in small groups to share a short personal story. Tell them to be respectful when listening (You may provide a story prompt, such as: a time when they were very scared; a time they saw a wild animal, such as a bear; the best birthday party or gathering they ever attended).
 3. Have a student share a story that their partner or group member told. Before they tell the story have them ask the story "author" if it is all right to share their story with the whole group.
 4. After the sharing of the lived (experience) story, ask the "author" how they would feel if the "teller" started telling everyone their story without getting permission first. Ask them how they would feel if the "teller" wrote a book about this story and published it without permission. (To add to this, they could also make money off this story.)
 5. Explain to the class how this could be seen as **appropriation** (taking something for one's own use, especially without permission) and that this is what has happened, and sometimes continues to happen, with Indigenous Peoples' stories.
 6. Tell students that traditional/ancestral Indigenous stories have been and continue to be the way Indigenous Peoples pass on their knowledge, preserve their history, and keep social order intact. These stories are like the textbooks and computers of today. These stories are connected to the local lands and Peoples, so they are theirs to tell and only for others to tell with permission.

7. What Indigenous stories can non-Indigenous people or Indigenous people outside of the community tell or share?
 - oral stories when the storyteller has given permission
 - published stories
8. Ask students: What is important about the retelling of Indigenous stories? Tell them these are the protocols, or rules/guidelines for sharing an Indigenous story:
 - having permission and acknowledging the source (author or teller)
 - saying what territory or Nation the story came from
 - acknowledging where they got the story from (book, website, etc)
 - not making any main changes to the story (storytellers may add their own small details, but the theme and ideas must stay intact to keep the teachings)
 - respecting protocols for when a story can be told. For example, for some Nations, traditional or ancestral stories are told only in the winter, once the first snow falls.
9. Have students work in small groups to find an Indigenous story that has been published or shared (can be lived experience or traditional). These can be in book form or from an online video. Tell them to make sure they learn the Nation and/or author/teller.
10. Have them share the stories by beginning with "This story is from the _____ Nation and was told by _____."

Extensions

- Each individual person takes their own meaning from an Indigenous story. Read a book or story by an Indigenous author (or orally tell a story) and ask students what their own personal learnings are from that story.
- Invite an Indigenous storyteller into your class or school. Together with your students, research and follow the appropriate protocols for the guest's culture.

Conclusion

There are many books by Indigenous authors that tell the stories of such things as land, people, language, relationship, and respect as well as colonial issues such as the history and effects of Residential Schools. When we speak about Truth and Reconciliation, much of the "truth" can be learned through these storytellers. It is by listening and learning that students can find understanding in their own journeys towards reconciliation.