



The Art of Storytelling

Reshaping and preserving traditions

By Barbara Ellen Sorensen

“When we speak, we use language conceptually. We can’t be glib with our language. We cannot throw the beloved away.” Simon Ortiz (Acoma Pueblo) said this several years ago during a writer’s conference in New York City. Ortiz is a well-known poet and the ultimate storyteller. For him, storytelling is as much about education as entertainment. It is through storytelling that each tribe’s history, moral precepts, and spirituality are passed down from one generation to the next.

This attention to the holistic value of storytelling and its link to community is understood by Kevin “Hoch” Decora (Lakota) who teaches at Sinte Gleska University in Mission, SD. He uses storytelling in his classes to reflect community and draw in students of all ages. “I use storytelling in all of my classes as a way to teach life lessons,” he says. “Most of the stories I use are Lakota stories I heard growing up. They reflect my own family’s personal history from the American Indian Movement (AIM) and the Wounded Knee Massacre,” he says. “They are valuable in teaching all ages life lessons tied in with classes I teach—general psychology, personal health and wellness, and crisis counseling.”

This sentiment is echoed throughout the tribal college movement, where story finds its way into many classrooms and programs. For example, Little Big Horn College (LBHC, Crow Agency, MT) offers a Speaker Series/Cultural Enrichment class focused on various topics in Crow culture and history. Library Director Tim Bernardis says that although the program is not specifically about storytelling, it occasionally features sessions on, for example, Old Man Coyote stories. The Speaker Series is free and open to the public. This program isn’t unusual. At tribal colleges, administrators and faculty members incorporate storytelling into their curricula, find ways to bring elders and students together, and include community members within the traditions of education and storytelling.

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Stories build intellectual capital

One way that many tribal colleges have been able to formalize storytelling is through a project of the American Indian College Fund (The Fund). In 2006, The Fund received a five-year grant from Lilly Endowment, Inc. The \$17.5 million grant has helped 32 tribal colleges build intellectual capital by strengthening academic programs, promoting professional development, and focusing on the recruitment and retention of top faculty and students. According to The Fund, tribal colleges initially struggled with the concept of “intellectual capital” and many worried that the concept wasn’t culturally congruent. The Fund’s president and CEO Richard B. Williams (Oglala Lakota/Northern Cheyenne) alleviated those concerns by naming the project *Woksape Oyate*, which is Lakota for “Wisdom of the People.”

The initiative has allowed each tribal college to more or less “customize” what it perceives as important to its particular mission. It has also helped build leadership among all the participants, while valuing the collective wisdom and experience—or “intellectual wealth”—of each tribal college. Through the project, tribal colleges created ten new bachelor’s degree programs, 13 new associate’s degree programs, and eight new certificate programs.

While *Woksape Oyate* intensified faculty, staff, and student recruitment and retention efforts, it also opened up greater opportunities for storytelling on tribal college campuses.



TIMELESS STORIES. The act of storytelling brings people together through time and space. United Tribes photo by Dennis J. Neumann.

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Lodgepole and one of our college students, Hannah Has Eagle, showed many of us, including community members, how they used to cook soup in a cow’s stomach that was placed in a hole in the ground, and heated with hot rocks that were put in a fire. She was illustrating how we actually used chemistry in our traditional ways.”

Bishop explains that through storytelling, people were instructed in the art of recognizing and gathering medicinal plants for healing purposes. Healing plants surround the people and being aware of their presence is the lesson embedded in a story that has been passed down through each generation. A story is constantly changing and reshaping itself, she says. “Everyone has a story, and we are always creating our own story,” she adds. “This type of history is not found in books, but is passed down from elders telling their stories to younger people.”

Bishop believes that the act of storytelling is much more effective than simply reading about something from a book—and that there is something special about the sound of someone’s voice relaying timeless information. “If you have ever noticed, little kids can be busy playing,” she says, “but if someone starts to tell a story or read a story, they inevitably stop what they are doing and come to listen to the story.” The auditory pleasure of storytelling engages the listener and an interesting reciprocity of learning emerges.

Storytelling also offers a tribe an auditory record of its traditional spirituality and history. Many tribes are now videotaping their elders and their unique stories in order to preserve what is quickly passing away. “It enhances our community by giving us another form of identity in knowing the personal history that is generally not printed in history books,” Bishop comments. “At ANC, we have a group of elders who come into the classroom and tell stories and share the ways that their grandparents taught them. We utilize this in order to blend our curriculum with our culture.”

Nurturing student storytellers

At some tribal colleges, storytelling is an official part of the curriculum. The Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA, Santa Fe, NM) has been teaching creative writing to students for 50 years.

“Storytelling is at the core of Native cultures, of course, and creative writing has been a part of IAIA’s curriculum since the school began,” says Evelina Zuni Lucero (Isleta/Ohkay Owingeh Pueblo), a creative writing faculty member. “Over

At Aaniiih Nakoda College (ANC, Harlem, MT, formerly Fort Belknap College), public relations officer Rebecca Bishop (Aani/Little Shell Chippewa Cree) worked with the Woksape Oyate Project to tell the tribal college’s story to the community, and to create open communication between the community and ANC.

The grant has allowed her to fine-tune and expand the tribal college’s outreach materials. Bishop tells the college’s story through brochures; alumni newsletters; view books; annual reports; public service announcements; articles in local, state, and national newspapers; journal articles; advertisements; ‘stuffers’; posters; and radio spots, as well as hundreds of photographs. By telling the tribal college’s story in so many ways, the grant has changed the way community members perceive the institution. By showcasing the many positive things happening at the college, Bishop says ANC is now perceived as “a beacon of light” on the Fort Belknap reservation.

Storytelling is infused not only into community life, but also into student experiences as well, according to Bishop. “Storytelling has been the earliest form of entertaining and teaching. In listening to my grandmother, who is 98, and my mother, who is in her 70s, and her husband, who is in his 80s, I have learned how things were (traditionally) done,” she says. “Recently, we had an Earth Day activity out at Hays

time, our curriculum has expanded from poetry writing, fiction writing, and playwriting to include screenwriting, creative nonfiction, and journalism.” She adds that all five degree programs allow students to tell stories in different mediums. “So much has been written about Indians by non-Indians,” she says, “(and) much of it erroneous, so it is important that Native people have a voice to tell their own story.”

One of IAIA’s goals is to dismantle stereotypes. IAIA encourages its students to step outside the boxes that society has placed them in, to take risks and break free of the binding stereotypes. Lucero is proud that the creative writing program avidly embraces this model of teaching, learning, and exploring.

“Our creative writing students in particular have always been encouraged to take imaginative risks in their writing,” she says. “Students produce writing reflective of their interests, influences, and contemporary experiences, which vary widely from reservation-based, traditional upbringing, to off-reservation experiences in border towns or large metropolitan cities, to Indian-centered, but not necessarily traditional upbringing.” Students draw on traditional oral narratives; personal experiences; and literature, film, music, and pop culture. They also inspire and influence one another.

At IAIA, says Lucero, the curriculum includes literature courses and special topics courses and exposes students to a wide array of influences that inspire their work. A grant from the Lannan Foundation enables the tribal college to invite accomplished American, Native American, and international writers to work with students during one-week residencies. IAIA has also increased the number of summer writing workshops our students attend.

In 2012, Jamie Figueroa (Taino) graduated as one of IAIA’s three valedictorians. To her, storytelling is a “basic unit of life.” As a returning, nontraditional, older student, Figueroa brought life experiences with her and a maturity that helped inform her own path through college. She had attended five different colleges before finding her way to IAIA.

IAIA’s creative writing program confirms what she believes is a rudimentary truth: “We exist because of story, and we are all storytellers,” she says. “When we write, we engage in a space that encourages exchange. Creative writing becomes a



SERIOUS ART. United Tribes Technical College student Cecily St. Cyr (Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska), is a student in the Media Arts division of the UTTC Art/Art Marketing Program. *United Tribes photo by Dennis J. Neumann*

basic need that helps one survive.” At IAIA, the creative writing program engaged her as a human being and, she says, helped form the empathy that fed her soul and spirit. “Storytelling evolves as an essential and sacred element of life,” she says, adding that storytelling, as part of the educational process, is really quite ordinary: “So, there is a sort of paradox.”

Thanks to financial support from IAIA, Figueroa attended a number of summer writing conferences. Perhaps the most life-changing conference was in Puerto Rico, in the town of Loiza, where Figueroa’s single mother was born and raised.

During her time there, Figueroa merged her creative writing with spirituality. She is grateful to those who helped her arrive at the place where her mother had been born. “My mother told me stories of this place, sometimes with misery and pain in her voice; other times, lovingly,” she says. “Seeing people who looked and spoke like me created a movement in my body that was familiar. This movement is present in my mother because (as humans) we embody the places we are from.” By visiting there, her writing became richer.

“Storytelling comes from these experiences,” she says. “I realize my stories come from dancing to the African and Taino rhythms of drums, watching the flow of the Loiza River, seeing the iguanas in the trees. After that trip, I felt the roots in my body growing strong. I felt more fully present.”

Jon Davis, chair of the creative writing department, explains that IAIA is not a tribally specific college and it doesn’t have access to tribal elders and community members on campus.

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The school is one of contemporary art; while students bring their unique cultural and tribal traditions with them, they also model their work after contemporary writers. This recognition of contemporary literature includes both Native and non-Native writers. “Our approach, from the founding of the Bachelor of Fine Arts program in 2003, until now, is to expose students equally to Native American literature, contemporary multicultural American literature, and world literatures in translation,” he says. “In the last three years alone, we have hosted writers from Kenya, Siberia, South Africa, and Iraq, in addition to an eclectic mix of multicultural American and Native American writers.”

Rather than focusing on a particular style or culture, instructors at IAIA nurture each student on his or her individual path. Within any one classroom, students may be working on a variety of projects—whether based on oral tradition, borrowed from hip-hop, or exploring language through an experimental mode. “As faculty, we try to lead the students toward a deeper engagement with whatever approach the students want to take,” says Davis. “We teach possibilities and craft, imagination and rigor, discipline and determination.”


Storytelling influences all realms of Indian art, from visual art to the writing arts—and the experience at IAIA is eclectic. There, narrative art and traditional iconography share space with abstract art, installations, and contemporary perform-

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ance. “It’s not always apparent how and if storytelling traditions might have informed the work,” says Davis. “The work arises from students’ experience, and that experience is extremely diverse. Some students grow up in rural environments without modern technology, others have grown up amidst technology. Some speak their tribal language and participate in tribal ceremonies and traditions, others do not.”

The ways in which education and creative writing merge at IAIA remind Davis of the beginnings of jazz in New Orleans. “The students write mostly in English, but they take the language and reinvent it, bending it to their needs much the way those early twentieth-century African American musicians took the staid instrumentation of the marching band and the concert hall and made it sing in unprecedented ways,” he says. “Likewise, our students are making the English language say things it never expected to say.”

Evelina Zuni Lucero adds that IAIA’s creative writing program is unique from other programs in that it is within an arts school—a Native arts school. Its sense of community is powerful, as well. “We come together to collaborate, celebrate, and recognize one another with cultural activities, exhibit openings, and monthly community gatherings,” she says, adding that because the program is small, faculty work closely to mentor and guide students. Many of the tribal college’s graduates have gone on to study at Brown University, Cornell University, Columbia University, Syracuse University, and the Iowa Writers Workshop at the University of Iowa.

Each tribal college is unique in that it mirrors and follows the historical, educational, spiritual, and healing traditions of its respective nation. Each Indian nation has its own singular characteristics. This is where storytelling plays such an important role, and why it holds such an esteemed place in tribal culture. Through tribal colleges, storytelling can remain an essential part of connecting the past, the present, and the future. Storytelling ensures that the voices of all tribal members are heard and respected. Storytelling ensures that “the beloved” is not thrown away, or lost. 

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