

Intellect, dream and action: Story-telling in Steiner schools in New Zealand and the embedding of Indigenous narrative knowledge in education

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that the historic mode of expression for Indigenous knowledge has been essentially visionary and mythic, often grounded in oral traditions of great antiquity. Essentially, communication of this knowledge has had a poetic ‘supernormal’ character, employing imagery that can be interpreted on many levels. The danger of superficially rendering ancient cultural forms of knowledge to fit with Western ‘scientific’ understanding is discussed, particularly the risk of divorcing such knowledge from the original, primal, imaginative source in which it is situated. Appreciation of this is necessary if Indigenous knowledge is to be effectively and sustainably embedded in education. The paper explores the educational significance of oral story-telling as a medium through which such knowledge can be articulated but also renewed and further developed, using the concept of Te Whāriki in New Zealand Schools as a model of culturally-inclusive, narrative-rich educational practice within the New Zealand national school system. A fruitful link is drawn between the oral traditions of holistic-wisdom knowledge of Indigenous people and the creative activity of oral story-telling in schools, encouraging an integrated approach to Indigenous knowledge in education that integrates intellect with emotional and practical intelligence.

Key Words: Indigenous; narrative; orality; story-telling; intuitive thinking.

Indigenous knowledge has its roots in story-telling passed down from generation to generation. It is essentially pre-modern in its gesture, grounded in tradition and imagery, often reflecting thousands of years of adaptation by a local community to the cultural and physical environment of a specific geographic or social region. Its mode of expression is visionary and mythic; it is infused with mythology which, Joseph Campbell (1991) describes as a “poetic, supernormal image, conceived like all poetry, in depth but susceptible of interpretation on various levels”. According to Campbell:

The shallowest minds see in it the local scenery; the deepest, the foreground of the void; and between are all the stages of the Way from the ethnic to the elementary idea, the local to the universal being (p. 472)

Indigenous knowledge is of growing interest to academics and development institutions seeking answers to social and environmental problems that cannot be readily found in globalized, modernistic knowledge systems. There is growing recognition that traditional practices and their cultural orientation have their roots in sustainable and holistic approaches to agriculture, medicine, and the management of natural resources (Nakashima et al 2000). However, there is a danger that superficially rendering ancient cultural forms of knowledge to

fit in with Western 'scientific' understanding will inevitably divorce them from their primal, imaginative source. Continuing access to this source is all-important if we are to develop future-oriented sustainable practice in human communities. Education's ability to recognize and acknowledge the story-telling source of such ancient knowledge will be a key factor in maintaining access to this source for coming generations. For Indigenous and first-people communities, the handing on of traditional narratives is essential for cultural continuity. The role of schools in supporting and celebrating this is significant, not only for the original inhabitants of a country or region but also for non-Indigenous, immigrant communities. A primary medium for such cultural transference will be oral delivery – stories told 'live' either by a class teacher or a visiting story-teller.

Conveying traditional stories through merely reading a text is secondary to the primal deed of telling a story 'live' to an audience. In the context of transferring Indigenous knowledge across generations or to newly arrived members of a community, story-telling has a ritual, cultic significance. Many stories are viewed as sacred, divulged only to people deemed ready and appropriate to receive them: they are guarded by keepers, for they have esoteric significance and potency for both listener and teller. For the Western, modernist mind, 'stories' are most likely to be viewed as mere tales for children or thought-provoking entertainment and are unlikely to be afforded high status in the canon of high literature.

The essence of Indigenous knowledge, however, lies in its imaginative, holistic and pictorial character; for instance, it can be described as 'Indigenous narrative knowledge', a term that emphasizes what Juan Martin Flavier (1995) describes as 'information systems (that) are dynamic, and are continually influenced by internal creativity and experimentation as well as by contact with external systems'. The idea of embedding this knowledge in education is an attractive one but any attempt to codify or formalize such systems runs the risk of destroying the very creativity inherent in the oral narrative tradition from which such knowledge originates.

N. Scott Momaday, Native American author of Kiowa descent and winner of the 1969 Pulitzer Prize, powerfully highlights the dichotomy existing between Indigenous oral tradition and the conventions of literacy introduced by white settlers in his novel *House Made of Dawn* (2000)

In the white man's world, language, too - and the way that the white man thinks of it - has undergone a process of change. The white man takes such things as words and literatures for granted, as indeed he must, for nothing in his world is so commonplace. On every side of him there are words by the millions, an unending succession of pamphlets and papers, letters and books, bills and bulletins, commentaries and conversations. He has diluted and multiplied the Word, and words have begun to close in on him. He is sated and insensitive; his regard for language - for the Word itself - as an instrument of creation has diminished nearly to the point of no return. It may be that he will perish by the Word (p. 89).

By implication, Momaday's critique of Western literacy culture is a celebration of orality, reminiscent of Socrates' remarks to Phaedrus when he compares the written word with the spoken. Referring to the writing down of speeches, personifying them as if they were living children, he says:

...when they have been written down they are tumbled about anywhere among those who may or may not understand them, and know not to whom they should reply, to whom not: and if they are maltreated or abused, they

have no parent to protect them; and they cannot protect or defend themselves (p. 60).

For Socrates, oral communication is the “intelligent word graven in the soul of the learner, which can defend itself and knows when to speak and when to be silent”. “You mean,” says Phaedrus in response to this remark, “The living word of knowledge which has a soul, and of which written word is no more than an image?” (Plato, 380 B.C./2008, LIX-LX)

Rudolf Steiner (1924/1995) shares Socrates’ classical reserve about the primacy of literacy. When speaking with a group of teachers about teaching writing and reading, he describes how Native Americans ran away when the early settlers first showed them printed letters because ‘they thought letters were little devils’. This is just what letters are for children, says Steiner, “They mean nothing to them. The child feels something demonic in the letters and rightly so. They have already become a means of magic because they are merely signs”. It is out of this reservation that a tradition of oral story-telling has become established in Steiner schools throughout the world. Starting primarily with younger classes but carrying on right into the teenage years, teachers prepare stories, folk tales, legends, myths, scenes from history and their own creations tailored to the particular needs of a class - even those of an individual child. They present these as much as possible without using notes. Steiner does not reject or devalue literacy in schools; indeed, he sets the highest expectations for pupils to master grammar and writing skills as they progress through school (Stockmeyer, 2001). He does, however, discourage teachers from teaching literacy at too early an age and urges them to work with lively imagery and sound when introducing letters (Burnett, 2007).

As story-tellers, teachers have considerable responsibility. When they enter the classroom, their personal orientation, their beliefs and values sound through every word they speak, through every gesture. This cannot be concealed and their pupils hear it. If there is vanity or ambition in their personality or their gestures convey fearful compliance with the demands of an external government agency, the children sense this, intuitively. They have highly tuned ‘crap-detectors’ which become increasingly active as the pupils reach their teenage years. Teachers who stand before a group of children and present a story without reading from notes, an oral narrative out of themselves, make themselves highly exposed. At the same time, they unite themselves with something primal, the force of the human word freed from the constraints of text, sensing and modulating delivery according to the response and engagement of the listeners, open to the moment of inspiration when speaker and listeners become one. Education is a moral art. The teacher has an ethical responsibility to be a ‘truth-teller’ (Foucault 1985), to point to the future in a way that sees the noble and beautiful in the world that inspires courage, will for the good and purpose in living. It is all too easy for story-tellers to be indulgent, to tell stories that are sensational, dramatic and overwhelming in an unhealthy way. Ancient narratives are often blood-thirsty with bizarre, disturbing imagery and the teacher-story-teller is continually called upon to select, reflect and carefully hone and shape the material they prepare so it truly meets the needs of the learning community with which they are engaged.

Since the Fifteenth Century, oral culture has been increasingly subjected to the intellectualizing imperative of modernity, linked to the universalizing influence of the printing press. Walter Ong’s (1982) classic study, *Orality and Literacy; the technologizing of the word*, acknowledges that oral cultures produce “powerful and beautiful verbal performances of high artistic and human worth which are no longer even possible once writing has taken possession of the psyche” (pp. 14-15). At the same time, he notes that, “without writing, human consciousness cannot achieve its fuller potentials, cannot produce other beautiful and powerful creations” (p. 15). The written word, he argues, is “absolutely

necessary for the development not only of science but also of history, philosophy, explicative understanding of literature and of any art, and indeed for the explanation of language (including oral speech) itself”.

Erich Neumann (1996) points to gradual but profound changes taking place in human consciousness through the increasingly widespread influence of the written (printed) word. With the advent of High Modernity (Giddens & Pierson, 1998) these changes have become increasingly marked. The thrust to achieve universal literacy within industrialized societies (West, 1996) wrought massive changes in the public mind-set. From the early Nineteenth Century, access by the general population to public libraries, Sunday schools and, especially newspapers, created a cultural environment where common literacy was seen as both the oil and binding force of society. “Hardly any democratic association can do without newspapers,” declares Alexis de Tocqueville (1840), commenting on American society during a visit in 1835. “The power of the newspaper press must therefore increase as the social conditions of men become more equal” (p. 122).

Walter Ong (1982) traces the evolution of consciousness from primary orality through communal literacy towards reflexive self-awareness. He speaks of “explicit philosophical concern with the self, which becomes noticeable in Kant, central in Fichte, obtrusive in Kierkegaard, and pervasive in twentieth-century existentialists and personalists” (p. 174), citing Erich Kahler’s classic publication, *The inward turn of narrative* (1973), as reporting in detail “the way in which narrative becomes more and more preoccupied with and articulate about inner, personal crises.”

So, what is the future for the “powerful and beautiful verbal performances of high artistic and human worth” (Ong, 1982, pp. 14-15) implicit in Indigenous oral narrative traditions? Are they destined to wither and fall at the cold touch of today’s literate intellectuality? Is there a place for the aesthetic, affective, dream-like power of the spoken word in a performativity-driven educational world where learning outcomes and achievement targets are narrowly defined and assessed? Narrative culture in Steiner schools promotes story-telling as a balancing counter-force against these requirements and does this on a day-to-day basis as part of the pedagogical art to which the teachers aspire.

The following examples of practice in Steiner primary schools in New Zealand present a picture of what can take place with a class of children through an integrated approach to oral story-telling. Children who regularly listen to stories told from memory develop an ‘imaginative ear’ for pictorial language; they grasp concepts embedded in images, intuitively, and maintain these associations at a deep, often sub-conscious level as emotional associations which may only come to consciousness in adulthood.

In New Zealand, teachers work with the concept of *Te Whāriki*, a ‘woven mat of knowledge and understanding on which all members of a community can sit’. This idea, deep-seated in traditional Māori culture, has been incorporated to good effect into the New Zealand Early Years Curriculum (Ministry of Education *Te Tāhuhu o te Mātauranga*, 1996) but is actually a concept that can be applied to learners and teachers of all ages and cultures. Stories and oral narratives are an essential element for weaving the multiple strands of understanding necessary for creating a communicative space in which people from different ethnic and cultural background can meet and work towards common understanding and action.

The creation story of Ranganui and Papatūānuku exists as an archetypal legend within the canon of Māori Indigenous narrative knowledge. In New Zealand Steiner schools, teachers commonly introduce this story to a class of nine-year-olds at the time when their emotional faculties awaken to a new awareness of self. As their intellectual powers develop, children of

this age experience, for the first time, a degree of separation from the magical, subjective, world of infancy. This separation experience is still child-like and dreaming but also disturbing and they readily identify with the powerful image of the earth-mother wrapped in dark embrace with the sky-father whilst the children within the darkness push and strain to separate the parents. They empathize with the rebellious off-spring, Tāne-māhuta, who clothed the separated earth mother in trees, bush and ferns; Tangaroa, the moody sea-god and the wild Tāwhirimātea god of weather, thunder, lightning, rain, wind and storms who attacks his siblings as he did not agree with the rebellion. When the pupils meet this story again during their teenage years, the same narrative can be a parable of dawning adult consciousness where the subjective and objective are riven apart, where the critical intellect awakens to a technological, scientific world, struggling to reconcile this with the equally powerful world of emotional passions and powerful impulses of will.

During their time at school, a typical Steiner pupil will have met such an archetypal motif in different forms and at different ages. At age ten, they will have heard the apocalyptic Norse legend of Ragnarök where Fenris, the giant wolf, wreaks havoc amongst the gods, devouring the whole world in his fury, until, at the last, fatal moment, he is confronted by the god, Vidar, who places his heel on the lower jaw, seizes the upper and tears the dissembler in two. Studying Mesopotamian culture in their eleventh year, the children hear of the legendary battle between Tiamat, the terrifying demon who keeps the whole world in perpetual darkness and Marduk, the hero-warrior who slays her and brings light and objective vision into human consciousness. Even the homely household tales told to the youngest children speak the same narrative language: the wolf who devours Little Redcap (Colum, 1972) and her grandmother is cut open by the huntsman as is the devourer of the seven little kids. “Oh, how dark it was inside the wolf!” exclaims Little Redcap as she steps free from the dark interior.

Stories derived from ancient, long-dead cultures still have the localized power of place and the cultural environment from which they originated. Their recurrent images contain deep, archetypal knowledge that still speaks to the intuitive part of the human being. Introduced in school, they lay foundations for a later mature thinking that can draw from unconscious depths, images and motifs that aid the grasping holistic ideas. Although Einstein (Isaacson, 2008) did not attend a Steiner school, he certainly recognized the potency of story-telling in laying the foundations for later intellectual development, attributing his own remarkable conceptual powers to the story-telling culture in which he grew up. Kate Forsyth (2015) records Einstein’s remarks when asked about his method of thinking, “When I examine myself and my methods of thought,” he proclaims, “I come to the conclusion that the gift of fantasy has meant more to me than any talent for abstract, positive thinking.” He is quite explicit about the source of his extraordinary intellectual powers: “If you want your children to be intelligent, read them fairy tales. If you want them to be more intelligent, read them more fairy tales” (para. 2).

Indigenous knowledge can be a repository for good ideas about “local-level decision-making in agriculture, health care, food preparation, education, natural-resource management” (Warren, 1991, p. 254) but if this knowledge become viewed merely as ‘intellectual property’ it is in danger of becoming divorced from the holistic, imaginative-intuitive way of viewing the world which is its source. Story-telling, the presentation of living ‘Indigenous narratives touched by the creative power of fantasy, generates deep level emotional response amongst its listeners. This feeling response is the foundation of action, of emotionally intelligent will.

Rudolf Steiner (1919/1996), speaking to teachers, asks the question, “What is feeling, really?” He answers the question as follows:

A feeling is closely related to will. Will is only feeling made active and feeling is repressed will. That part of will that we do not completely express and that remains in the soul is feeling; feeling is blunted will (p. 79)

The concept implicit in the above remark plays a significant part in the educational praxis of Steiner teachers. They tell stories not just to elaborate intellectual ideas or to entertain: they use oral narrative to touch the feelings of the pupils, and through this, to stir the will-forces which express themselves when they are moved by the interplay of dark, light and the colour of narrative imagery. These will-forces may surface during lessons enabling the teacher and class to explore and deepen their understanding, bringing it into concrete expression. At the same time, the same feelings may remain, sleeping in the subconscious until much later in life when they emerge as inspiration and motif for focused action in the world.

A nine-year-old girl listens with bated breath as the teacher tells the story of Adam and Eve and the eating of the apple from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. She is totally absorbed as Eve walks determinedly towards the forbidden fruit and suddenly calls out in a loud voice, "Don't do it! Don't do it!" The teacher continues with the story right to the moment when the two miscreants are banished from Paradise, leaving them gazing back longingly back through the gates of the lost world of innocence. The next day, the story continues: the wind blows coldly in the harsh world outside; it rains and there are thorns and sharp stones under foot. They are hungry. Adam and Eve learn to build a shelter; they gather food and hunt. They have to work and suffer but do this with dignity and trust in the future. Later, the teacher introduces practical lessons where the children visit farms and construction sites, observing human beings at work in the world. They learn simple building and farming techniques, putting up a wood store for a neighbour, preparing a small patch of land for growing corn, harvesting and preparing food. They learn to weigh, measure and apply simple calculations to do with practical life. Deep feelings experienced through dynamic telling of an archetypal myth lead to action, to deeds of will which lay foundations for an holistic understanding and feeling towards the world which can mature and bear fruit many years later when they reach adulthood.

Stories can be archetypal, embedded in the dream-like fantasy landscape of pre-modern consciousness. They can also be contemporary, reflecting the everyday world in which we live and work. Although Steiner would have supported Einstein's recommendations regarding fairy tales, he encouraged teachers to move from these simple tales through myths and fables into the world of history, recognizing that, here too, we are story-tellers, narrators recalling events from many viewpoints, adapting the story to fit with our own predilections and even prejudices. When the children are twelve to thirteen, said Steiner, you should tell them about the different peoples of the world and their various characteristics which are connected with the natural phenomena of their own countries (1919/1997).

A classroom culture where oral story-telling is cultivated, particularly the sharing of ancient, traditional narratives, is one where students and teachers develop a sensitivity to spoken language, to the poetic power of metaphor, of personification and the imponderables that sound between words. The history of colonialism has many dark pages, not least the wanton destruction of sites, artefacts and traditions that were sacred to Indigenous and first-people communities. In some cases, only fragments of a once-profound spiritual culture remain but such fragments are increasingly recognized as embodying wisdom and healing insight of great value and significance for the generations to come. In the spirit of Einstein's celebration of the foundations of original thinking, children who have learnt to listen with open ears and hearts to 'live' stories are likely to be able to formulate their own imaginative and creative response to challenging situations that face them when they reach adulthood.

Here is a story from today, told by Max about his experiences managing a large building project in Papua New Guinea. There were serious problems with thieving. Despite rigorous security arrangements, thousands of dollars of building materials kept disappearing, no matter how many guards or sophisticated surveillance technology were introduced. At length, in desperation, he phoned a friend who had close connections with Indigenous tribes in the highlands. He explained his dilemma:

“Five grand and you cover the airfare,” was the friend’s response. Max agreed and, quite soon, a group of small warriors arrived on the site. From that moment, there were absolutely no problems with theft. The warriors were Kukukukus.

Max goes on to describe a huge gathering of many tribes in the highlands of Papua New Guinea - the Mountt Hagen Show –

Some tribes walked for days to go to this important cultural festival. There were headdresses, plumes and all the noise and cacophony that takes place when people meet. The area where the performances took place was not fenced but had two entry posts through which everyone entered - very strange, I know. When a small group of Kukukukus arrived, draped in their bark cloaks and carrying their black palm bows and arrows, everyone close by went silent and parted to allow them passage. They were feared by everyone. (Maxwell Smith, personal communication, 2014, June 12)

There are thousands of stories like this, tales told from all over the world by settlers and workers abroad of their encounters with Indigenous people. These are stories of the meeting of different cultures, of the tidal wash of earlier colonialism and its post-colonial consequences, often carrying a detritus of guilt and anger mixed with wonder and awe that human beings can be so different from one another whilst having so much in common. They are good stories for young people preparing to go out into the world, to work in and for a stressed planet that needs them to become responsible custodians. They are narratives of human relationships, bearing within them the seeds for mutual recognition of what different cultures can offer one another. Out of this recognition there are possibilities for new working communities to emerge, so long as the coming generations are given the opportunities to hear the narratives and reflect on the complex interpretations we can draw from them.

Over centuries, the thrust of modernism has exploited and, in some cases, exterminated much of the knowledge and wisdom of Indigenous people. The remnants of this knowledge are precious and coming generations will need to protect it and devise ways to carry it into an uncertain future. The voice of the individual teacher, self-evaluating, self-directing the oral narrative he or she presents to the children in their care, has the potential to reunite this wisdom with the intuitive source from which it stems.

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