

Storytelling briefly, relational learning, and community accountability: Extending academic learnings through multi-media vignettes

Leeann Hilsen & Jane Slessor
Faculty of Social Work



UNIVERSITY OF
CALGARY

Storytelling Briefly

Lee Maracle (2015) says that “the point of hearing (and now reading) story is to study it in and of itself, to examine the context in which it is told, to understand the obstacles to being that it presents, and then to see ourselves through the story, that is, transform ourselves in accordance with our agreement with and understanding of the story ... If we are colonized, study can direct us toward freedom, and it can be liberating. If we are colonizers, it can direct us toward our humanity, and this too is liberating” (p.1-2).

Sharing stories allows us to stimulate new thinking and engage in reflective relational learning, while building connections between people and professions. This facilitates transformation and transcends disciplinary divisions.

Values That Guide Us

Principle/ Value	How We Enact This Principle as Our Purpose
Relationality/ Solidarity	Can we contribute to, gather, and tell stories of relationality, ² solidarity, ³ and coalition ⁴ to counter colonial narratives of separation?
Reciprocity/ Mutuality	Can we ensure ongoing mutual benefit and that we acknowledge kinship by keeping gifts circulating? ⁵
Reflexivity/ Humility	Can we engage in a relational process of collective reflexivity where we respect difference, examine power, and interrogate what we know and don't know? ⁶
Respect/ Relevance	Can we demonstrate respect through accountability and gratitude to communities, ensuring our work is relevant and honouring? ⁷
Reverence/ Interconnectedness + Holism	Although we connect to spirit in different ways, can we ensure our academics (mental) are integrated with other aspects of our beings and relations (physical, emotional, spiritual)? ⁸
Responsivity/ Flexibility	Can we, alongside communities, engage in a process of ongoing evolution towards balance, and the good life, in a non-colonizing way? ⁹
Responsibility/ Social Justice + Healing	Can we, alongside community, collectively work towards goals of justice and healing as determined by the community? ^{10,11}

Skywoman Falling

(A Poem by Leeann)

The gift of the geese breaking her fall.
How might we break the fall for others?
They called a council.
The weakest diver got the dirt, to make earth. We all have gifts.
Skywoman did not come empty handed, she was a good visitor.
The tree of life.

Kindness and something more flow between the braider and the braided...
The two connected, like our connection to mother earth...like our connection to each other.

Same species, same earth, different creation stories.

Ancestral Gardener. Or outcast in exile. Or both?

The original immigrant...welcomed by the winged and four- legged, swimming relatives
Accept the gifts and be honorable.
How can we do that today?
A compass, a map to orient us.
What map do we have within ourselves?
What map might we create together?

Reciprocity.

The Vignettes

Skywoman Falling (as told by Robin Wall Kimmerer¹²)

(VIDEO)

The process is the outcome. Overcoming, adapting, growing, birthing, fighting, grieving, healing, evolving, learning, stumbling, reclaiming, building, decolonizing, showing up, becoming. Feminism is action and thought. Women are active agents in their own lives; Indigenous women are facilitators and preservationists of sovereignty. There's a refusal of deficit; this is connected to survivance which is a practice, and connected to sovereignty of identity, body and thought.

Mabel & Essie¹³

(POWER POINT PRESENTATION)

We learned from Mabel and Essie that adversity can make you stronger. Ceremony and language are important. Matriarchy is a practice of resilience, as well as resistance to ascribed identity. Matriarchy articulates social, cultural, political & economic systems that are fully egalitarian. Matriarchy resists temporal constraints and embraces cacophony and complexity.

Resistance: Idle No More^{14,15} and No More Silence³

(GRAPHIC STORY)

We learned about sovereignty over bodies, spirits and lands. Resistance strategies do not align with a pure or singular mode of resistance. Complexities, complicities, intersections, and contradictions in systems of oppression are acknowledged, binaries are challenged, and responses are coalitional and multifaceted.

In the absence of identifying the colonialist relations and power dynamics impacting coalitional work, efforts can't be equalized without threat of re-colonization. The need to equalize must be resisted; rather the efforts must be towards radical social change. We commit to relational learning, collective care, critical self-reflection, and radical decolonizing solidarity.

Willie Jack¹⁶ and The Modern Matriarchs¹⁷

(VIDEOS)

Indigenous feminism resists the division of public/political/social and individual/private and ruptures the convenient and colonial dislocation of present and future from past. There is a recognition of evolving identity as a source of power, throughout time and space.

There is a connection between being an auntie and being a niece. What does being a leader mean for us? Do we consider ourselves leaders? Can we picture ourselves doing it? Can we picture ourselves making a difference?

Territory Acknowledgment

We acknowledge that we both live in Amiskwaciwâskahikan in Treaty 6 Territory, on Métis homelands. And, in a sense, both of us have settled here from other places. Our relationships to this territory, however, are very different. Leeann is Métis Cree and Dene from Treaty 8 and Jane is an uninvited white settler occupier. We are both committed to carrying out our treaty responsibilities in our lives and our academic work, and one way we stay accountable is working alongside each other towards shared goals in respect, reciprocity and friendship.

Key Learnings

We hosted a visiting circle with Indigenous and Settler women to talk about what it meant to be a woman. These are some of our reflections from the circle, our conversations and our readings.

LEEANN

Radical relationality & visiting: I never thought that visiting was an act of 'radical relationality' or decolonizing. But it is both. Because we kept true to our values, we were able to learn in a creative, ethical way. Through stories, we shared laughter, heartache, tears, connection. Visiting and being kind to each other is a radical act of decolonization. This is invigorating as a way to learn and live.^{2,18,19}

Culture & matriarchy: Matriarchy is embedded in nationhood and built from cultural understandings and teachings. It is a practice, an ideology, and self understanding. Reclamation of culture and matriarchy is not separate; just like colonization is not separate from patriarchy; healing, cultural reclamation and sovereignty are intertwined.^{13,14,20} Matriarchal roles are based on survivance, responsibility, relationality, resistance.

We have complex identities, and our strength is built from a cacophony of voices; we reinvent and creatively transform hardship into strength, leadership and healing. Our scars can demonstrate resilience and alternative narratives, and different conceptions of history and futurity. We saw this in the way all the women spoke about the challenges they faced, and their active resistance to oppression. It is noteworthy that all the women spoke of love, connection and relationality as central to their resistance. Indigenous (and settler) feminism is brave, there is a focus on overcoming, not on threat.^{2, 13,21, 22,23}

Kinship: We have connections, but we also have difference. The metaphor of rivers merging is one that gives me hope and inspires new visions of the future. We can focus on differences AND use these differences as a means to expand and build inclusion.²³

JANE

Gardening as a Feminist Act: Gardening helps me to make tangible and more than tangible connections to Mother Earth. Plants are my teachers. Through visiting with plants, ²⁴ I am connected to land and my ancestors even though I am far away from my homelands. Connecting to my ancestors allows me to de- and re-construct who I am beyond coloniality and whiteness and understand what I can bring to anti-colonial feminist work.³

Equity in the System vs Dismantling the System vs. Moving Beyond the System Alternative Futures: Authors question the wisdom in looking for answers within the existing state. They critique whitestream feminism ²⁵ for maintaining the state.^{20,26,27,28,29,30,31} Kuokkanen (2020) speaks about post-state Indigenous sovereignty as restoring nationhood beyond the settler colonial. The idea of a future beyond the current feels hopeful and speaks to the importance of, in relationship, imagining shared visions.

Gender & Nation: When white women spoke in our circle, they identified first as women; when Indigenous women spoke, they identified as Indigenous women (Nehiyaw, Káinai, Métis Cree Dene). For them, gender and nationhood were clearly not separate. Intersectional gender equity issues (feminist issues) are not separate from sovereignty (nationhood) issues.^{4,32,33, 34,35,36}

Stories & Laughter: I was reminded about women's stories ¹ and laughter. "Stories are not just stories, told to fill a room with echoes of voices and laughter. Laughter is good medicine, too" (Tuck et al., 2023, p.150).



Stories



References



lhilsen@ucalgary.ca
jane.slessor1@ucalgary.ca