The Alberta Journal of Educational Research *Vol. XLIX, No. 2, Summer 2003, 113-122*

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From Native North American Oral Traditions to Western Literacy: Storytelling in Education

This article discusses the implications of the dichotomy between Native North American oral traditions and Western literacy with special attention to storytelling and its implications for the definition of a school curriculum that would be inclusive of Native perspectives. Specifically, the author refers to the work of Eliade (1960, 1963) in examining the nature of myth as a particular form of narrative while addressing some critiques to his analysis of Native cosmology. This discussion enables the author to construct a critique of Egan's (1986) theoretical model of the use of storytelling in education from a First Nations perspective.

Cet article traite des répercussions de la dichotomie entre les traditions orales amérindiennes et la tradition littéraire occidentale; plus particulièrement, des implications d'intégrer les histoires racontées dans un programme d'études scolaire qui incluerait des perspectives autochtones. L'auteure fait référence au travail de Eliade (1960, 1963) dans son étude du mythe comme forme particulière de narration et critique certains éléments de son analyse de la cosmologie autochtone. L'auteure se base sur cette discussion pour formuler une critique du modèle théorique de Egan (1986) sur l'intégration du récit dans l'enseignement offert selon une optique autochtone.

Literacy is a hallmark of modern Western societies. Although we may now be computerized, we are still in the age of paper where everything must be recorded and noted in the mnemonic device, which is the written word. In contrast, orality is believed to be an essential characteristic of traditional Aboriginal cultures (Cajete, 1994; Kroeber, 1981; Tafoya, 1982; Ywahoo, 1987) The flaw of this dichotomy is that Aboriginal cultures defined as oral traditions are also described as nonliterate societies. This common belief, or misbelief, is highly reductionist insofar as these cultures used (and many still use) their own alphabet such as signs or symbols to communicate. Therefore, it is more appropriate to distinguish Western and Native cultures in terms of world views, consciousness, and modes of discourse rather than in terms of a Western-literate/Native-nonliterate dichotomy.

In this article I discuss the implications of the dichotomy between Native North American oral traditions and Western literacy, with a specific focus on the implications of the use of narratives in educational practices. The first section focuses on the dichotomy between First Nations oral traditions and Western literacy traditions and investigates their significance and implications on narratives, both oral and written. The second section describes the essence of myth in oral traditions. I refer to the work of Eliade (1960, 1963) in examining the nature of myth while addressing some critiques to his analysis of Native cosmology. Following this discussion of how Native and non-Native world

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views and narratives differ, I examine Egan's (1986) theoretical model in the third section because it illustrates the role and form of storytelling in education. This section provides a First Nations response to Egan's model.

Western Literacy versus First Nations Oral Traditions

Although Western society is undoubtedly known as a literate society, it is important to remember that literacy cannot be equated with the simple act of writing. The modern Western conception of literacy as a structured, analytical, and rational construct can be traced back to classical Greece. Conceptions of Western literacy mainly originated from Plato's theory (1908) that society should be based on rational and analytical thinking, and therefore should be free of the influence of poets and artists. It marked the rise of the *logos* in Western society.

In *The Republic* Plato (1908) argues that poetry is the enemy of the intellect because it is founded on knowing the universe through emotions rather than cognition. It follows that poetry and oral histories should not be part of the educational system. Or to quote Plato: "there is no record of any poet, ancient or modern, curing a patient and bequeathing his knowledge to a school of medicine, as Asclepius did" (X, p. 599). Language, and especially the written word, as the expression of logical thought then becomes the only viable record of knowledge that can be effectively transmitted. Literacy and orality have implications that go beyond the issue of whether a culture uses a writing system. What characterizes a society as having an "orality consciousness" versus a "literacy consciousness" (Gunn Allen, 1998, personal communication) is not whether people write poems and stories or narrate and transmit those poems and stories orally. Rather, such consciousness depends on whether people as exemplified by Plato believe that poetry as a means of transmitting knowledge should be banished from education because it is the enemy of rationality; or whether people consider oral tradition as part of a holistic system, which therefore should be integrated into school curriculum. In other words, orality and literacy consciousness have been shaped by two different world views, each with its own specific epistemology and mode of discourse. What enables us to associate Plato's theory with literacy consciousness is not so much that Plato excluded the poets from his Republic and did not include poetry in his ideal educational system, but his reason for not doing so. He argued that only rationality founded on logic and cognition should be both the method and the goal of education. The Western Platonic philosophical tradition that was revived during the Enlightenment viewed all Native, non-Western traditions as superstitious. This dominant meta-narrative driven by scientific thought marginalized orality, both politically and culturally.

Research shows that dominant Western traditions have affected the strength and credibility of Native oral traditions. In particular, Archibald (1990) identifies this dichotomy between First Nations orality and Western literacy using a story about Coyote, the "trickster of learning," who sees the world with mismatched eyes. In the story Coyote has lost his eyes and is given two "new" eyes, one by Mouse and the other by Buffalo. Archibald explains that perhaps Coyote's condition is a reminder of how First Nations people struggle to get a clear view of the world. Archibald further argues that this story is an analogy for the overpowering position that the literate Western

tradition has assumed while "negating the intellectual credibility of orality" (p. 66). She demonstrates how Western traditions have influenced this story's content, drawing an analogy between the element *eye* and the antagonism between orality and literacy: "perhaps the small eye represent[s] their [First Nations people] oral tradition which has become denigrated and diminished through Western historical influence; while the larger eye representing the literate Western tradition has assumed an overpowering position" (p. 68). Archibald explains that First Nations people find it difficult to find a suitable bridge between orality and literacy. She highlights the importance of empowering storytelling in education, stating that "First Nations orality must be recognized as having intellectual as well as social benefit to learners" (p. 78).

The denigration of Native oral tradition involves more than discrediting Native myths; it is also related to the inability of Western cultures to comprehend the circular nature and function of oral systems. The structures of narratives are shaped by specific modes of discourse and consciousness, as Gunn Allen (1983, 1986, 1989, 1994, 1996) has demonstrated. A first remark would be that narratives can be written and still belong to oral consciousness. Havelock (1986) states, "there are some texts that do indeed speak.... They have survived the effects of transliteration from Phoenician to Hebrew" (p. 47). Orality and literacy by their very nature belong to two different types of frameworks, following specific formal and rhetorical principles. Frey (1995) explains that "orality tends to reveal a world in terms of action, process and becoming," whereas "literacy is directional and focused, allowing the viewer to select and dissect from the field of visual experience" (p. 143). A narrative structure shaped by orality consciousness, would be different than one shaped in a predominantly literate society. As Gunn Allen (1986) stresses:

> Traditional tribal narratives possess a circular structure incorporating event within event, piling meaning on meaning, until the accretion finally results in a story. The structure of tribal narratives, at least in their native language forms, is quite unlike that of Western fiction; it is not tied to any particular time line, main character or event. (p. 79)

Orality and literacy also differ in how narratives are read, heard, and understood. Gunn Allen (1994) discusses this dichotomy between Western narratives characterized by Western literacy consciousness and Native narratives characterized by traditional orality consciousness. She argues that the former uses the structure of "conflict-crisis-resolution," whereas the latter arises from a holistic context: "Underlying all their complexity, traditional American Indian literatures possess a unity and harmony of symbol structure, and articulation that is peculiar to the American Indian world" (p. 21). Western literacy consciousness usually requires an analysis and deconstruction of texts, whereas orality consciousness implies that meanings arise from the story as a whole in a holistic context.

The notion of holism has been argued to be an essential principle on which Aboriginal epistemology is founded. In particular, Ermine (1995) draws a comparison between Aboriginal thinking and Western science. He explains that whereas Western science is based on the assumption that "the universe can be understood and controlled through atomism" (p. 102), Aboriginal epistemology emerges from a holistic view of the universe. He states, "Those who

seek to understand the reality of existence and harmony with the environment by turning inward have a different, incorporeal knowledge paradigm that might be termed Aboriginal epistemology" (p. 103). Ermine further argues that whereas Western ways of knowing involve a process of viewing the world objectively, Aboriginal ways of knowing focus on the "inner space":

> Aboriginal people found a wholeness that permeated inwardness and that also extended into the outer space. Their fundamental insight was that all existence was connected and that the whole enmeshed the being in its inclusiveness. In the Aboriginal mind, therefore, an immanence is present that gives meaning to the existence and forms the starting point for aboriginal epistemology. (p. 103)

King (1990) addresses this dichotomy between Aboriginal epistemology and Western epistemology in his stories. Indeed, King emphasizes the necessity for Native writers to recognize the importance of using Native characters in expressing Native values. In particular, he often uses in his stories Coyote, a mythological trickster character, explaining that

> the trickster is an important figure for Native writers for it allows us to create a particular kind of world in which the Judeo-Christian concern with good and evil and order and disorder is replaced with the more Native concern for balance and harmony. (p. xiii)

This dichotomy between Aboriginal epistemology and Western epistemology also affects how knowledge is imparted to Aboriginal students. Cajete (1994) argues that Aboriginal students encounter cultural conflict as they move from the process of learning holistically through stories to the process of understanding the world objectively by fragmenting it and separating it from our inner space. In particular, Cajete states, "The difference between the transfer of knowledge in modern Western education and that of Indigenous education is that in Western education information has been separated from the stories and presented as data, description, theory, and formula" (p. 138).

In the educational sphere, when stories are used, teachings are structured differently in Native narratives than in Western narratives. Only since contact have some Native myths and tales incorporated an explicit moral. Gunn Allen (personal communication, 1998) demonstrates how content and structure of Native literature have been influenced by Western culture post-contact: "There are some divergences from tribal narratives modes (more pronounced in some of the stories than others) because present-day Native cultures and consciousness include Western cultural elements and structures." As an example I cite the narrative "Unkana" (Robertson, 1995), the structure of which is Western but includes Native elements. Indeed this story spells out a moral rule, which is common in Western literature. Whereas both Native and Western oral traditions are educational in one sense—one can learn something by hearing them—the way knowledge is imparted to the listener by the teller differs. In contrast to modernist Western narratives destined for children, in Native oral traditions stories that are told to children do not have an explicit moral at the end. That is not to say that the child does not learn from the story, but meaning has to be constructed by the audience, and meaning may only arise much later—months, perhaps years later. Also, the process may involve listening to the story several times before a meaning or a teaching becomes apparent.

In addition, it should be noted that stories are subject to change; narrators may introduce new elements into old stories. As Ong (1982) stresses, "In oral tradition, there will be as many minor variants of a myth as there are repetitions of it, and the number of repetitions can be increased indefinitely" (p. 41). In oral cultures, the telling of a story involves a particular interaction between the storyteller and the audience. Each telling corresponds to a unique situation.

The Essence of Myth in Oral Traditions

Myths are central to oral traditions. Gunn Allen (1986) writes: "Myth is a kind of story that allows a holistic image to pervade and shape consciousness, thus providing a coherent and empowering matrix for action and relationship" (p. 104). Similarly, Frey (1995) explains that "myth, as applied to Indian mythology, refers to that which is considered a 'deeply true story.'... The truth of a myth is expressed metaphorically and anagogically as opposed to empirically and literally" (p. 13). The structure of orality is most clearly evident in myth, especially myths relating the creation. To understand myth, I refer to the pioneering work of Eliade (1963) in examining the structure of orality consciousness as expressed in Native myths. Eliade's work on myth is important, as it intends to approach myth from an Aboriginal perspective. His work is instrumental in understanding the nature of myth. However, a few critiques should be made about Eliade's theory, as his analysis is somewhat inadequate in its explanation of Native cosmology and Native oral tradition.

Eliade (1963) defines myths as true stories that narrate a sacred history, describing mythical events that took place in what he calls the time of the Beginning or mythical time. Myth is regarded as a sacred, exemplary, and significant story: sacred because the characters are, according to Eliade, mostly supernatural beings; exemplary and significant because these stories reveal a culture and its values, express belief, enforce morality, and therefore provide a model for human activities. Indeed, according to Eliade,

> In other words, myth tells how, through the deeds of Supernatural Beings, a reality came into existence, be it the whole of reality, the cosmos, or only a fragment of reality—an island, a species of plant, a particular kind of human behaviour, an institution. Myth, then, is always an account of a "creation"; it relates how something was produced, began to be. (p. 5)

One may summarize Eliade's conception of myth as follows: myth as experienced by Aboriginal people is a cultural reality, a narrative that reveals the structure of reality and constitutes the history of mythical events believed to have happened in the time of the Beginning. It is, therefore, considered to be not only true, but also sacred because it relates the acts of Supernatural Beings.

Eliade's work emphasizes the idea of myth as a narration about the past, a description of the origin, of how the world came to be. The "Supreme Being" is believed to have created the world and "man," which means that "man" is inherently shaped by mythical events that took place in the time of the Beginning. All supernatural beings or mythical ancestors are described by Eliade as being part of the past, a past that does not belong to historical or chronological time, but more to a "beyond," to what he calls a "divine world" related to a mythical time before the creation of man. Eliade separates profane and sacred time, sacred time being the mythical time of the beginning: profane time being

chronological, historical time. Eliade associates myth in traditional societies with the idea of a linear conception of time (evolving from a past mythical time to a present chronological time), whereas Aboriginal scholars (Cajete, 1994; Highwater, 1982) point out the idea of a circular conception of time as part of their culture. The problem that arises is that this does not take into account a circular conception of time in which the future is superseded by the past.

Furthermore, Eliade (1963) does not acknowledge the divine as part of what has been created or as part of the everyday life. In distinguishing a mythic and a chronological past, the divine is seemingly evacuated from the present. The act of creation is fixed once for all and is neither continuous nor repeated:

> Many primitive tribes, especially those arrested at the hunting and gathering stage, acknowledge the existence of a supreme being; but he plays almost no part in religious life.... The Supreme Being is believed to have created the world and man [sic], but he soon abandoned his creations and withdrew to the sky. (p. 93)

Eliade states that the Supreme Being or Creator is only "made present" through events such as ceremonies. He believes that myth is more a source of knowledge of the past (the origin) and a history of another world (the divine world) than a narrative about a society's current understanding of the world. Eliade's conception of myth implies that stories created in mythical time are told from generation to generation without taking account of new historical events, a view that presents myth as static. In contrast, one of the essential characteristics that Aboriginal people would point out is that myths are continually regenerated and include past and present. Gunn Allen (1989) explains that context is always involved in myths: "Context is important to understanding our stories, and for Indian people that context is both ritual and historical, contemporary and ancient" (p. 2).

In Eliade's (1963) work, myth is regarded as a lived experience in the sense that it constitutes a privileged link between mythical and historical or chronological time. It is, in a way, what keeps human beings related to the divine, which implies that the notion of the divine is, in Eliade's conception, associated with the notion of transcendence, as if the divine and the sacred were not believed to take any part in historical time:

> Myths are the most general and effective means of awakening and maintaining consciousness of another world, a beyond, whether it be the divine world or the world of the Ancestors. This "other world" represents a superhuman, "transcendent" plane, the plane of absolute realities. (p. 139)

Although he acknowledges that myth can be experienced through rites, and therefore to some extent is part of human life, Eliade suggests that myth is constituted by a divine knowledge constructed from a transcendent, mythic, and therefore nongrounded level.

One could anticipate a First Nations' response to this idea of transcendence as the essence of myth. If one characterizes myth with reference to this idea of a narrative revealing the structure of reality, reflecting the culture, and being the foundation of social life, myth should be regarded as a grounded metaphor connected to a specific place. Myth has a social context, for it is connected to a specific local environment and to how people live in and with this environment. Malinowski (1926) explains that in traditional societies myths are a

reflection of the cultural and social organization of a particular society and supply models for human behavior:

> Studies alive, myth ... is not symbolic, but a direct expression of its subject-matter; it is not an explanation in satisfaction of a scientific interest, but a narrative resurrection of a primeval reality, told in satisfaction of deep religious wants, moral cravings, social submissions, assertions, even practical requirements. Myth fulfils in primitive culture an indispensable function: it expresses, enhances, and codifies belief; it safeguards and enforces morality; it vouches for the efficiency of ritual and contains practical rules for the guidance of man. (p. 19)

Myths are presented as a response to a social need; they give individuals a sense of belonging to a community by expressing shared values.

Postmodernists have stated "the author is dead" (Derrida, 1976). In the case of myth, there is no explicit author nor one truth, but a collective authorship and a plethora of truths. Creation myths, whether written or oral, unlike other forms of discourse do not usually have an explicit author. They are meant to represent the inherent social and symbolic structure of the group. For this reason, this "authorless text" belonging to all, yet composed by none, is in essence an oral text regardless of whether it has been transcribed or not.

Storytelling and Education: Anticipating a First Nations Response to Egan's Model

Although the study of myth and orality may be considered an abstract preoccupation in the ivory tower, it does have implications in the definition of school curriculum. Indeed, as Olson (1977) states, "[Oral language] is the language children bring to school" (p. 278). Therefore, whether one claims that language is best represented by written texts (Chomsky, 1972) or by oral utterances (Chafe, 1980), it remains critical that teachers have to work with the oral language tradition with which children share their understanding of the world. Thus storytelling would seem to be an ideal teaching strategy. Egan (1986) argues that teachers should draw on the power of stories to stimulate children's imagination.

The issue that needs to be addressed, however, is that although the importance of storytelling as a learning tool is unquestioned, the fact remains unquestioned that most schools pay attention only to Western forms of storytelling and ignore Native oral traditions of storytelling. Indeed, a number of Native writers argue that storytelling is a valuable contribution to learning. In particular, Cajete (1994) contends that "Tribal myths contain tremendous potential for illuminating the education of both the individual and the community" (p. 115). The work of Cruickshank (1990) shows how the stories of three Yukon Elders can be used as a powerful educational tool for future generations. Wilson (1996) explains that storytelling is part of people's lifelong learning experiences. She writes: "The stories handed down from grandmother to granddaughter are rooted in a deep sense of kinship responsibility, a responsibility that relays a culture, an identity, and a sense of belonging essential to my life" (p. 7). The work of Frey (1995) shows the importance of Native oral literature in relation to culture, identity, and education. In particular, he states, "In addition to its role in integrating humans and their world, oral literature fills a critical didactic function. Moral lessons and practical information are

offered" (p. 173). Sarris (1993) adds that the use of storytelling in the classroom promotes critical thinking by enabling students to make sense of their life experiences.

The problem I address arises from the fact that Native oral traditions have been marginalized, and when orality is put forward as a teaching method, it is invariably the Western model that is lauded. Unfortunately, this does not take into account the Native perspective and the Native oral tradition that teaches in a way that does not conform to Western logic. Egan (1986) for one argues in favor of an educational model using [Western] storytelling as strategy and technique. He defines stories as follows:

> They [stories] involve a conflict or problem of some kind, which the rest of the story will be taken up resolving.... The story does not deal with anything except the problem set up in the beginning once it is underway. Everything in the story is focused on that central task. They [stories] set up an expectation at the beginning, this is elaborated or complicated in the middle, and is satisfied in the end. (p. 24)

Egan argues that a "good" story sets up an expectation at the beginning, generally a conflict, leading to a crisis, then to a resolution. Unfortunately, Egan's criteria for a good story are invariably Eurocentric and must be challenged. The characteristics of a good story according to Egan seem to correspond to the dominant Western mode of discourse. Egan states, "Anything that does not contribute to or fit with this rhythm is irrelevant to the story and should be excluded" (p. 24), and then argues that education should use storytelling as a technique and the conflict-crisis-resolution structure as a strategy. Egan writes:

> A model for teaching that draws on the power of the story, then, will ensure that we set up a conflict or sense of dramatic tension at the beginning of our lessons and units. Thus we create some expectation that we will satisfy at the end. (p. 25)

The conflict-crisis-resolution structure constitutes Egan's (1986) justification for the use of story in education.

However, as I argue in the first section, Native orality consciousness and Western literacy consciousness imply two different modes of discourse, two distinct kinds of metaphorical thinking, and consequently two different conceptions of *teaching as storytelling*. Therefore, Egan's model may be appropriate for Western educational systems, but may not fit into the epistemology of oral traditions. Many First Nations people define the relationship between storytelling and education in a different perspective: Educational strategies in Native storytelling are not based on the conflict-crisis-resolution structure (Egan states that "stories end," p. 30), but rather on the idea that stories unfold and have effects beyond the immediate. Similarly, Frey (1995) writes:

> The telling of a particular story is not typically followed by a specific, Aesoplike, "moralistic-commentary." The stories are never analysed or talked about in that way. Moral lessons are deeply embedded within the narratives, to be sure, but they are left to be discovered and explored by the listener. The great truths in life are to be actively sought out. (p. 175)

It should be noted that in Western traditions too, stories are recognized as having a transformation effect. For example Caillois (1938) argues that stories

help individuals to deal with their emotions: by identifying themselves with the characters of the story, they may find answers to personal preoccupations related to specific circumstances of their lives. On an educational level this implies that stories are teachers themselves: they inform and transform.

Storytelling can be considered as a learning experience by both Western and Aboriginal cultures. However, as seen above, how knowledge is transmitted through storytelling differs. In general, oral cultures (cultures shaped in orality consciousness) and literate cultures involve in modes of thought and expression two distinct learning processes. Ong (1982) makes a distinction between "thinking with" and "thinking about":

> For an oral culture learning or knowing means achieving close, empathetic, communal identification with the known, "getting with it." Writing separates the knower from the known and thus sets up conditions for "objectivity" in the sense of personal disengagement or distancing. (p. 45)

Western and Native societies correspond to two different modes of thought and expression. However, human consciousness can be subject to transformation when culture contact occurs, and may lead to culture change. Specifically, as I point out above, traditional Native literature has been affected by contact with Western society and its literacy consciousness. Ong states that "Today primary oral culture in the strict sense [cultures untouched by writing] hardly exists, since every culture knows of writing and has some experience of its effects" (p. 11). However, oral modes of thought and expression still constitute a cultural reality. Thought grounded in an oral tradition involves holism and situational thinking.

Five hundred years after contact, Native Americans have retained an oral tradition that is distinct from the literacy consciousness of their Euro-Canadians and Euro-Americans neighbors. Egan was right to stress the importance of storytelling in the teaching of children, but he was not aware of the cultural bias that was present in his research. To be truly effective and respectful of Native culture and traditions, curricula would have to be elaborated keeping in mind Native orality consciousness. Western scientific knowledge may no longer be predominantly transmitted by poets, but the existence of other valid forms of knowledge should be acknowledged, especially Native knowledge, which is transmitted primarily through an orally based tradition. Besides, the world would be a bleaker place without poets, whether Native or non-Native.

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