



# The Learning Circles Project: *Values & Practices*



## Storytelling in Learning Circles

by Janice Brant



“All oral traditions are composed and performed in three dynamic dimensions using the body and hands, face and voice: we sing and dance, tell stories and riddles and quote proverbs, we sculpt out of timber and stone, marble and ivory, we shape and mould clay, and craft grass into baskets and beads and cloth into tableaus and dolls.”

~ Joan Conolly

Oral tradition and storytelling have been used by many cultures world wide to pass down knowledge of themselves and their learning to future generations. Stories are used to teach origins, beliefs, values, practices, and social customs. They demonstrate lessons of survival, describe the landscape, and convey deep spiritual connections. Trickster stories challenge our creative thinking and cause us to laugh at our shortcomings. Storytelling is vital to linking the past, present and future as has been demonstrated by many of the learning circles identified in the Indigenous community.

A common observation made by the research team in both rural and urban centres, and including the Indigenous community, was the opportunity for participants to tell their stories and recount life experiences as a principal method of learning about identity and addressing barriers that they had experienced in their lives. In sharing their stories and lived experience, learning circle participants are validated for who they are and where they have come from. In this way, storytelling adds a dimension of healing to the learning circle.

In the Indigenous community the storyteller would ask or counsel the listeners to use their own minds to see what the stories mean to them. Traditional teachers generally accept that each listener is at a different stage of life, and only able to grasp and learn certain elements of a story at certain moments in their lives and learning cycles.

[www.nald.ca/learningcircles/index.htm](http://www.nald.ca/learningcircles/index.htm)

This understanding seemed to come about naturally as part of the learning circles and participants engaged readily in the opportunity to find themselves in the stories of others and develop compassion for the struggles and challenges that others have faced or celebrate their insight and achievements. Participants benefit from drawing upon the lessons and learning of the storyteller to enhance or broaden their own learning. It also has a way of leveling the playing field and dismantling previous barriers such as racism and sexism.

The stories told in learning circles are not simply for entertainment or pleasure. Stories are powerful teachers as they emerge from social struggles and injustices. They reflect the most intimate perceptions of people and unearth longstanding beliefs and attitudes. They explore the growth, development, and synchronicity of human relationships and cause individuals to reflect upon their own relationships to self, family, community, nation, and creation. As a result, one's identity is continually being challenged and reconstructed in the adoption of changing understandings and diverse perspectives.

Storytelling plays an important role in learning circles. It offers healing (teaching and learning) in the expression and validation of one's lived experience. It fosters group cohesion and social development. Finally, it provides opportunities for cultural and linguistic continuity.

Storytelling in its many forms is evident in learning circles and valued in the Indigenous community. Communities of people from around the world have listened to and shared stories to warn their children of danger, gain new insight, resolve conflict, celebrate change, and make spiritual connections. These stories come from all our relations and ancestors to support continual and lifelong learning.