

# Oral Tradition - A Literacy for Lifelong Learning: Native American Approaches to Justice and Wellness Education.

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**Abstract:** *Native American oral tradition provides a literacy for lifelong learning that promotes perspective transformations. This approach is particularly suited to justice and wellness education because participants engage multiple ways of being and knowing: sensory, philosophical, serious, humorous, etc. Oral traditions can be understood in the context of transformative learning that has implications for adult education.*

Raven and Coyote have educated indigenous people of the Pacific Northwest for lifelong learning since time immemorial. The “Trickster” from the Southeast, Rabbit, as “Brer Rabbit” or a celluloid “Bugs Bunny,” still provides learning opportunities for children and adults. Internationally, characters from oral traditions are alive and well, slipping in and out of the modern psyche, engaging us often on video and movies screen to provide insights into living and learning. We see these “Tricksters,” the living legacy of oral tradition, as a literacy that has been “over looked” in the field of adult education research and the practice of life long learning. Adult education can facilitate the repatriation of this literacy which has in recent history been “captured” and commodified as entertainment or therapy into a more accessible learning consciousness.

## **Multiple Literacies for Lifelong Learning in the Postmodern Moment**

For Native Americans “discovery” marked the advent of creeping modernism and the denial of situated oral traditions in the development of the metanarrative of western history. With the accelerating pace of western history in this post modern moment, underlying oral traditions are “peeking” through as assumptions are increasingly examined. Such conditions require practices to become, as EU President Fontaine (2000) suggested to her ministers, more “audacious and transparent”. Audacious in the acknowledgement of the “not’s”: there are no universal conditions of knowledge and criteria; observation is not value-neutral or atheoretical or

“common” sense; data or language is not transparent without interpretation (Usher, et. al. 1997, p. 204). Thus transparency requires that there be interpretation and definitions situated at metapositions which permit the illumination and negotiation of the multiples. How such positioning (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999) “works” becomes an important dimension of learning over time. Consequently, in this moment where knowledges are increasingly recognized as multiple, based on multiple experiences and realities, what is demanded from adult educational practice is a means to negotiate such multiples and facilitate such negotiation. This requires a metapractice in which a reflective, socio-culturally positioned practitioner assists the individual in the positioning process. Oral tradition situates the learner/teacher in socially constructed action in which a “really good” personal narrative may be constructed to bridge the multiple narratives.

## **Oral Tradition as Metapractice – Metaliteracy**

The many literacies that are required in our cross cultural, cross disciplinary practice as First Nations community educators from Canada and the United States, requires that we bring both the process and content of such oral traditions into our child welfare and health workshops to promote justice and wellness in the face of the massive injustice and disease in our communities. The strategies of oral tradition are more than storytelling, central is listening, without verbal or mental interruption (James,

1998), a skill that is deeply profound (Fiumara, 1990). Strategic positioning (James, 1998; Harré & van Langenhove, 1999) is essential to facilitate the process. The principles of storywork, respect, responsibility, reciprocity, reverence, wholism, inter-relatedness, and synergy, feature the “Tricksters” who are seen as “doings” rather than “beings,” “doings” that aid in reflection and understanding (Archibald, 1997).

### **Trickster Strategies in Justice and Wellness Education**

Justice and wellness are important educational concerns for Native Americans and other disadvantaged populations in particular but also more generally. Our practice of using oral tradition as a metaliteracy permits us to reflect on this practice through the lens of the metamotivation (Apter, 1993) to negotiate and manage the vertical, multiple potential transformations (Cranton, 1994). Cross culturally Tricksters have provided powerful teachings about learning. The “Tricksters” of oral tradition provide cues for how this works, how “to do.” We offer oral tradition as part of the “tool kit of literacies” relevant to adult educational practice for Native American justice and wellness education and more generally as a strategy for wholistic education in the new millenium.

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