



LISTENING, UNDERSTANDING, AND REFLECTING: A STUDY OF THE ORAL TRADITION IN EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Oral tradition does not refer to evidence or oral history; rather, it refers to the knowledge, recollections, and information that a group of people has accumulated over a long period of time. Oral tradition, as used in a broader sense, refers to the vocal expression used in the recall and transfer of a particular, conserved textual and cultural knowledge. An oral tradition or oral transmission of knowledge is a form of education that works in both similar and different ways than other kinds of education. In classical education, learners are the observers, and because they are only relying on what they hear, they tend to perceive at a much higher level than those who are relying solely on their perceptions. Future generations are taught information, cultural and social values, and collective memory through a variety of oral traditions and expressions. In order to keep cultures alive, they play a crucial role. It is well known that oral tradition stimulates multiple parts of the brain in different ways. A variety of movement, hand gestures, as well as call and response are often used in the singing, chanting, and storytelling. As a result of the collaboration between the body and the brain, muscle memory is built and active learning is stimulated. In this study, we will examine the significance of oral tradition in education and the importance of harnessing the power of listening, understanding, and reflecting in the teaching and learning process.

Keywords: Oral Tradition, Education, Listening, Social values, Culture

INTRODUCTION

“The Elders would serve as mnemonic pegs to each other. They will be speaking individually uninterrupted in a circle one after another. When each Elder spoke, they were conscious that other Elders would serve as ‘peer reviewer’ [and so] they did not delve into subject matter that would be questionable. They did joke with each other and they told stories, some true and some a bit exaggerated but in the end the result was a collective memory” (Augustine, 2008).

Oral Tradition has a range of meanings from “knowledge about the past that is relayed by word of mouth from one generation to the next,” to “the practice of recording, archiving, and analyzing eyewitness testimony and life histories” (Llewellyn et al., 2015). According to scholars Hulan and Eigenbrod (2008), oral traditions are “the means by which knowledge is reproduced, preserved and conveyed from generation to generation. Oral traditions form the foundation of Aboriginal societies, connecting speaker and listener in communal experience and uniting past and present in memory”. Oral historians appear to concur, however, that it is a “powerful tool to engage people in the discovery and making of history and in the critical assessment of how stories about the past are created” (Brooks, 2006). “Oral-based knowledge systems are predominant among

First Nations. Stories are frequently told as evening family entertainment to pass along local or family knowledge. Stories are also told more formally, in ceremonies such as potlatches, to validate a person's or family's authority, responsibilities, or prestige" (*Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples*, 1996, p. 33). The public educational role of historical narratives, which incorporate daily voices of people, can have transformative effects on legislation, policy, media, and citizenship. In an attempt to right past wrongs, government commissions, the legal system, and para-public entities increasingly look for oral histories. "Oral tradition and testimony were, for example, central to Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission on the Indian Residential Schooling system and for the Indigenous land claims case of *Delgamuukw v. British Columbia*. Oral history is part of a global social movement to democratize history and nation-states" (Ng-A-Fook & Llewellyn, 2017).

The teaching of oral traditions is now a component of a larger democratic movement, with this public pedagogical goal in mind. Naturally, oral history has long been an essential teaching tool used by various cultures to inform their populations about the past. "Homer is often accredited with sharing some of the earliest Greek accounts of the Trojan War in the *Iliad*, and Odysseus's long journey home in the *Odyssey*" (Kirk, 2024). It is possible to refer to some of the early oral historians as poetic pedagogues, as they were travelling poets who delivered these historical accounts. In Indigenous communities across Canada, the US, and other countries, elders have been telling stories about the past for aeons, passing down knowledge and skills that help the next generation acquire the interrelation literacy needed to coexist peacefully with one another and the land.

Oral tradition has developed into a well-respected educational tool for preserving our family and community ties to the past. "Despite an early start, it is only in the last 10–15 years that oral tradition, testimony, and life histories have become an integral part of educational programming, from elementary schools to museums, across North America. This trend is even more recent within European and Asian countries, as well as in Australia, New Zealand, and parts of South America. Acknowledging its pedagogical values, along with the rise of social history, schools are beginning to adopt explicit curricular objectives to bring eyewitness accounts of the past to life for students" (Ng-A-Fook & Llewellyn, 2017). It is a known fact that educators are providing their pupils with digital devices to document the lives of individuals in their communities, whether or not this is explicitly stated in the curriculum. To learn more about the effects of political injustices, they are also increasingly consulting existing oral history sources, such as those from veteran and survivor organisations.

"This is largely the outcome of a transition away from history education as the memorization of facts (e.g., dates and persons) and towards the application of historical reasoning" (Lévesque, 2008). "With this change in curricular focus for the twenty-first-century classroom, history teachers in most countries are now asked and seeking ways to create pedagogical spaces for cocreating knowledge about our collective experiences of the past. Educators are expected to teach students how to construct historical accounts and to draw upon eyewitness accounts of history to represent difficult knowledge about the past" (Ng-A-Fook & Llewellyn, 2017). For these reasons, oral history teaching is becoming more popular; nonetheless, history teachers have limited resources to assist them think through if and how oral history education is a "best practice" for seeing people in their previous lives. The aim of this study is to examine the significance of oral tradition in education and the importance of harnessing the power of listening, understanding, and reflecting in the teaching and learning process.

METHODOLOGY

This study, which is qualitative in nature, was conducted using the terms oral tradition, culture, social values, listening, and inclusive education to search international and national journal databases for relevant material. Hernández et al. (2015) define qualitative approaches as research that carry out the process of gathering information and then analysing the results obtained in such studies.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

"The oral tradition is a system of knowledge that has been used by Native peoples for millennia. It instructs and preserves cultural life ways for Native people throughout the world. It is the key to the past, present, and

future. Traditional stories have been told to teach morals, the rewards and unwanted consequences of actions, and the importance of self-discipline and integrity, all through example.”(Bauerle, 2003, p. xviii)

Different forms of knowledge are transmitted from generation to generation through oral traditions, which also serve as a mechanism of knowledge reproduction and preservation. Oral traditions, which unite the speaker and listener in shared experience and weave the past and present together in memory, are the foundation of Aboriginal society. Listening to the oral histories helps one understand how Aboriginal artists and writers' voices might be heard in both the communities they come from and the communities in which they are accepted. This is one way that oral tradition is understood as a type of knowledge influencing the work of these artists and writers. According to Kimberly Blaeser, there is "a dedication to an oral aesthetic in the rhetoric, and sometimes in the written works, of many Native authors," which means that writers translate "not only oral language but form, culture, and perspective" (Blaeser, 1999, p. 53). This means that Aboriginal writers' literary works are influenced by their oral tradition (p. 55). This 'textualized orality,' to use Susan Gingell's term (Gingell, 2004, p. 286), pervades Aboriginal literature produced in English, indicating the work's significant reliance on oral tradition. Ruffo claims that “[t]he Oral Tradition continues to influence contemporary Aboriginal literatures profoundly . . .” resulting in “a stylistic and thematic hybrid of the oral and written, the past and present, the Aboriginal and the Western” (Ruffo, 2001, p. 6).

“India, a land of diverse cultures and traditions, has a rich heritage of oral tradition that has played a significant role in preserving its cultural heritage, transmitting knowledge and values, and building a sense of community and social cohesion among its people. Oral tradition, passed down from one generation to another through verbal storytelling, has been a powerful tool in shaping and preserving the unique identity of India” (Indian Culture Team, 2023). Oral tradition has been instrumental in preserving India’s cultural heritage. Through the art of storytelling, myths, legends, and folktales that are deeply rooted in Indian culture have been handed down from one generation to another. These stories not only entertain but also serve as a link to the past, connecting individuals to their ancestors and ancestors to their descendants. The oral transmission of cultural knowledge, customs, rituals, and beliefs has ensured the survival of these cultural elements even in the face of modernization and globalization.

Oral tradition has been a primary medium through which knowledge and values have been transmitted in Indian society. From ancient times, important texts and scriptures have been orally transmitted by storytellers, known as bards or sages. This oral transmission has allowed diverse communities to pass on religious, moral, and ethical teachings, thus contributing to the moral fabric of Indian society. The emphasis on values like truth, righteousness, and compassion is deeply ingrained in the oral tradition of storytelling, imprinting them in the minds of the listeners.

In Indian history, storytelling has been the main form of instruction. Indian stories serve a moral purpose, in contrast to Western stories that aim to amuse. Indian stories have two main purposes: first, they should encourage personal development; second, they should advance expertise. In Indian cultures, professional competence and personal development are seen as essential to learning and success, although in Western education these are seen as distinct objectives (Deloria & Wildcat, 2001). The following values are frequently expressed in Indian stories: "indirect communication and noninterference, silence, reflection, and spirit; generosity and cooperation, independence and freedom, respect for elders and wisdom, connectedness and love, courage and responsibility" (Swisher & Tippeconnic, 1999, p. 122). Indigenous narratives often emphasise the interconnectedness of all entities, and from these connections arise a duty to care for others, since “the survival and well-being of the individual is synonymous with that of the community” (Garrett & Garrett, 1996, p. 165).

Indian folktales emphasise the importance of details while expressing a comprehensive understanding of the cosmos. Garrett and Garrett (2002) illustrate this point in a clear and concise way with the following narrative:

Many years ago, when I was only a small child, my grandfather and I were sitting by the Oconaluftee River's

side. I was playing in the water, and he was relaxing on a rock in the afternoon sun. He said, "What do you see?" to me.

"I see the water," I said.

"What else do you see?" he asked.

"Well, I see the fish," I responded because there were small minnows swimming in the water.

"What else do you see?" he asked.

"I see the rock," I said.

"What else do you see?" he asked again.

"Well, I don't see anything else," I answered.

"No," he said, "What you see is a reflection of the whole world before you." (p. 20)

Similar to this tale, the Indian oral tradition places emphasis on the specific details that each person experiences, yet these details serve as a metaphor for the total experience. "Indians as a rule do not try to bring existing bits of knowledge into categories and rubrics" (Deloria & Wildcat, 2001, p. 22) since "it is hard to understand something if one is always controlling and taking it apart" (p. 14). Since everything is interconnected, every observation and experience can't be isolated from the entirety of life's experiences and must instead represent life's larger pattern or experience.

Accurate sharing of information is crucial while narrating a story in order to respect both the experiences of the individual presenting the tale and the storytellers from the past. This emphasises how Indian education is experiential. "Experience shapes indigenous education and necessitates the awareness of self as crucial in order to attain knowledge," as noted by Deloria and Wildcat (2001, p. 13). The combination of listening and doing, which gives students time to process and internalise the meaning of oral communication before engaging in a learning experience, emerges as a theme for Indian student success in Cleary and Peacock's (1998) interviews with Indian and non-Indian teachers in BIE and HIE schools.

Although no particular Indian learning style has been found, Cajete (1999) clarifies. "A predominantly nonverbal orientation; tendency towards visual, spatial, and kinesthetic modes of learning, heavy reliance on visual perception and memory; preference for movement and activity while learning; and preference for process learning that moves from concrete examples to abstractions" are among the general tendencies that have been identified by research (Swisher & Tippeconnic, 1999, p. 153). The research-identified nonverbal orientation emphasises listening, which is a crucial aspect of the oral culture. Respect for the speaker and their message is demonstrated via listening. "How well we listen is almost more important than what we say," remarked a school administrator who was interviewed by Cleary and Peacock (1998, p. 161). In Indian culture, reflective listening also provides the time and chance for education that are ascribed to inherent spiritual powers (Garrett & Garrett, 1996).

Consequently, there are a number of fundamental elements to the oral tradition, which has been the primary method of moral and practical education in Indian history. The communication's content or goal is moral in nature, promoting Indian cultural values such as the interconnectedness of all things and personal accountability to others and the community, in addition to the apparent use of spoken language to deliver information. To comprehend, consider, and assimilate the communication's substance, one must listen. Stories communicate people's experiences from their own point of view as well as serving as a representation of the greater totality of human and communal experiences, much like listening is an experience. Respecting those who have previously told a tale and the experiences it depicts comes from listening to the story and accurately retelling it.

Learning and education benefit greatly from oral tradition, which improves memory and cognitive abilities while providing special educational and pedagogical value. The interactive and participatory nature of oral

tradition makes it an effective educational tool. In a classroom setting, oral storytelling stimulates active listening, critical thinking, and imagination in students. It encourages them to engage in dialogue, ask questions, and interpret stories, fostering a deeper understanding of the subject matter. Furthermore, through oral tradition, cultural values, moral lessons, and historical events can be conveyed in a captivating and memorable way, making learning an enjoyable experience. Research has indicated that the oral transmission of information enhances cognitive skills and memory. When stories are orally presented, listeners are required to actively process and retain information, improving their cognitive capabilities. The rhythm, repetition, and melody in oral tradition aid in memory retention, helping individuals recall information more effectively. Additionally, the engaging and interactive nature of oral storytelling stimulates multiple senses, making the learning experience more holistic and impactful.

In the field of education, deliberate incorporation of listening, understanding, and reflective thinking results in significant improvements in teaching methods. “As educators, the pursuit of harnessing the benefits of reflective thinking not only enhances the learning experience but also nurtures critical thinking skills essential for students’ holistic development” (Archibald, 2023). In this study, we look at the importance of oral tradition in education and the powerful link between reflective thinking, listening, comprehending, and successful pedagogy, as well as how it plays a critical role in building a dynamic learning environment. We reveal the transforming power of intentionality in the educational setting and explain how purposeful reflection increases understanding and engagement among learners. Educators may foster a growth attitude, encourage a lifetime love of learning, and create deeper connections with their students by adopting this intentional approach.

CONCLUSION

Oral tradition, with its communal nature, has played a vital role in building a sense of community and social cohesion among the people of India. Oral storytelling has been a shared experience that brings individuals together, strengthening the bonds among community members. The act of gathering around a storyteller and listening to the tales not only fosters a sense of belonging but also promotes dialogue, discussion, and a shared understanding of cultural values. It creates a space where individuals feel connected to their roots and each other, enhancing social harmony and a collective identity.

“Oral history can be truly revolutionary pedagogy” (Ayers and Ayers, 2013). The digital record of our life stories is pervasive in the times we live in. Thus, if Margaret MacMillan is correct when she says that “history is widely popular these days,” then oral history is becoming ingrained in our regular social obsessions (MacMillan, 2008). Particularly among young people, oral tradition and history have been incorporated into a confessional culture that has grown out of social media use (Freund, 2014). Of course, it is debatable to what degree obsessing over individual life experiences and firsthand recollections of the past is advantageous. It is still true that oral history/tradition has permeated every aspect of our culture and that people are drawn to the notion that each person's narrative has significance. This is partly due to the fact that oral history is, as Thompson reminds us, “a history built around people” (Thompson, 2000) i.e., historical narratives are brought into and taken out of the community on a regular basis. Thus, one can say that oral tradition has a momentous role to play in education and learning, offering unique educational and pedagogical value and enhancing cognitive skills and memory.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To uphold the continuity of oral tradition, it is crucial to promote and integrate it into educational curricula and community programs. By incorporating oral storytelling into schools and educational institutions, children can be exposed to the rich cultural heritage of their country and develop an appreciation for oral traditions. Community programs, cultural festivals, and storytelling events can serve as platforms for oral storytellers to showcase their skills, pass on their knowledge, and inspire future generations to carry forward the oral tradition.

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