Session 1: Native American Influences


Long ago, before there were people,
the Creator made fire.
He gave its power to the Conifers,
who lived high in the mountains.
They selfishly guarded its secret,
and kept it inside their bodies to stay warm
while other creatures shivered when it was cold outside.

“How Beaver Brought Fire to the People”
A Palouse-Nez Perce Legend
Told by Gordon Fisher (Yosyos Tulekaskin/Blue Man), 2006
Lapwai, Idaho

Stretching across the heartland of the inland Pacific Northwest is a mystical expanse of land where the lower Snake River and its tributaries winds through a tapestry of valleys, hills, and mountains. Located five miles above the Palouse River's confluence with the Snake, the deafening rainbowed spume of Palouse Falls pours down nearly two hundred feet.

Palouse Falls and Lower Palouse Canyon
(John Clement Photograph)

Gordon Fisher, a noted Nez Perce storyteller, learned from his grandparents how this land was formed. In the time of the Animal People, four giant brothers armed with spears attacked Beaver who peacefully resided near his lodge at present Hole-in-the-Ground, a day’s ride to the north. A battle ensued in which Beaver clawed and chewed out the Rock Lake channel, one of the deepest lakes in the Pacific Northwest. Beaver tore his way toward the Snake River where he beat his tail along this route several
times to form the smaller falls along the lower Palouse River. He was struck again at Aput Aput (Falling Water) where in his pain Beaver cut the castellated formations and sheer cliffs of Palouse Falls. Beaver fell from his wounds where the rivers met, and his heart was turned to stone. The Palouse people sprang from this part of Beaver.

This is the story of how and why Columbia Plateau creation legends found their way into local language arts curriculum. We have found that collecting and examining stories of place encourages collaboration and socialization while learning. Place-based literacy learning is hardly an innovation in education. Eliot Wigginton’s high school students in Raburn Gap, Georgia, gained notoriety in the 1960’s for their cultural journalism that examined the values of our social setting, rural Appalachia. Wigginton’s students conducted in-depth interviews with community members, which they then edited and published annually in a journal that remain in print as a best-selling book series (Puckett, 1989). Throughout our vocations as a social studies educator and Native American historian (Richard), literacy educator (Kristine), Palouse-Yakama tribal elder (Carrie), and Palouse-Nez Perce elder (Gordon), we became interested in place-based learning as the most authentic way to bring community concerns into classrooms across disciplines. Because our place is the Pacific Northwest, involving middle school students in interdisciplinary study of the creation legends of the Columbia Plateau’s First Peoples like the Palouse, Nez Perce, and Yakama makes sense to us.

From the Local to the Universal

The objective of place-based literacy learning is to use local literacy artifacts to facilitate critical thinking about cultural, political-economic, and environmental connections in order to promote community sustainability by relating local narratives to the wider world. Four core aspects of teaching are generally emphasized in place-based literacy learning including (1) consideration of community life, indigenous knowledge, and local ecosystems; (2) active, inquiry-based interdisciplinary learning experiences; (3) preparation for citizenship and the technological literacy in the information age; and (4) reflection about these experiences (Sobel, 2005, Gruenewald, 2003). Collecting Native American legends can occur in language arts classrooms but the learning that occurs in doing so can extend to other subjects, especially social studies.

Place, or setting, often drives the plot of a story, allows readers to encounter and empathize with familiar and unfamiliar cultures, and, because of its situated nature, often delivers an unexpected wallop of universal truth. In stories, places are not neutral; they represent much more than a plot of ground. A place is shaped by dynamic interactions of physical space and the culture of the people who live on it (Tuan, 1979). The convergence of space and culture often results in local stories that offer insight into original inhabitants of a place. We believe that these stories deserve to be included in literature studies in secondary schools. As Harvard professor Helen Vendler observed, “Literary imagination is incurably local. But is it against the indispensable background of the general literary culture than native authors assert their local imaginations. Our schools cannot afford to neglect either resource” (Vendler, 1981). As teachers, we believe that the value-laden stories of historically neglected indigenous peoples allow our students to reexamine modern values.

The Model

Our first step in place-based learning was to activate student interest and knowledge in local Columbia Plateau legends. Basal literature anthologies for middle level students fell short. They featured only a handful of popular selections by (or more commonly, about) notable Native Americans and ignored the diversity present in Native American tribes. However, Richard, in his pursuit of local history, found some age-appropriate indigenous literature that gave students some knowledge of Nez Perce culture and legends. One text, First Fish. First People: Salmon Tales of the North Pacific Rim (University of Washington, 1998), is still in print. Other local myth was printed in limited editions and unavailable. The Way It Was (Anaku Iwacha): Yakima Indian Legends, a book of Sahaptin legends published by the Region IV Johnson O’Malley Committee, was out of print but permission was granted by copyright owners for classroom use. This text was critical because it mentioned a regional storyteller, Gordon
Fisher, who became an invaluable resource because of his vast knowledge of Palouse and Nez Perce oral legends.

As these legends were presented to students, several open-ended questions “what” and “how” questions served as a framework for understanding Plateau legends as important aspects of local Native American culture:

What is sacred or revered in Plateau creation legends?
What obligations do humans have for nature in legends?
What natural symbols are used to represent time and space?
What moral virtues are extolled in legends?
What is the role of ceremonies and celebrations in legends?
How do characters or storytellers demonstrate artistic expression in legends?
How is the passing of time expressed?
How is change and innovation expressed in legends?

After students became familiar with Columbia Plateau legends in printed texts, they conducted their own oral histories. Native American students interviewed and recorded their parents, grandparents, and other family elders who had creation legends to tell while non-Native American students collected creation legends arising from their heritages. A cadre of student volunteers willing to travel on Saturdays to area Indian reservations met with tribal elders to collect their stories. Orientation sessions on etiquette, respect, and responsibilities were held before each trip and students assigned specific tasks such as note-taking, recording, and photography.

These visits proved so personally and culturally enriching that we wanted tribal storytellers to visit us and tell their stories to entire classrooms. Teachers and students contacted tribal education officers to identify individuals who were able to travel to the local school in order to tell stories and answer student questions. Tribal participants were compensated by the school as “adjunct faculty members” for their valued time and travel. Funds for this purpose were raised by the class through the printing and selling of the oral histories and legends students collected. Written copyright permissions from all storytellers were procured for such works. An example of a Palouse legend told by Gordon Fisher is included below.

Snake River Canyon near Wawaiwai
(John Clement Photograph)
“How Beaver Brought Fire to the People”

Long ago, before there were people, the Creator made fire. He gave its power to the Conifers, who lived high in the mountains. They selfishly guarded its secret, and kept it inside their bodies to stay warm while other creatures shivered when it was cold outside.

One winter it was so cold that Pik’úunen froze completely across. The Animal People were suffering, and thought they would freeze to death if they couldn’t get fire.

Coyote called a meeting at Wawáwih and sent out Mourning Dove, Robin, and Eagle to spread the word all across the land.

The Animal People came from all around and Coyote asked, he asked; “How can we get fire from the Trees?” Finally Beaver had an idea. “The Cedars and Pines are soon gathering for a great council along Wel’íwe. I will hide along the riverbank and get their fire.”

The Conifers gathered just like Beaver said. The Cedars built a huge warming fire, and gathered around it after bathing in the icy waters of the river. They knew the Animal People wanted their fire, so they posted Pines as sentries all around to guard their secret.

But Beaver was hiding under a clump of earth and roots along the bank, and when a hot coal rolled down from the fire, he grabbed it, held it tight to his chest, jumped up and sped away.

The Pines screamed the alarm and started chasing after Beaver. He lunged back and forth to escape them, and then raced straight ahead, so the Grand Ronde River is crooked in some places, and straight in others.

The Pines chased Beaver along the river until they became exhausted, and gathered in dense clumps still scattered along its banks.
Strong Red Cedar had joined in the pursuit and continued running until he reached Léewikees at the mouth of the river. He knew he would not catch swift Beaver but went to the top of the hill to see where he was going. From this lookout he saw Beaver reach the Snake River and head further downstream. “We cannot reach him now,” he shouted the Trees below.

Beaver safeguarded the fire as he swam across the river and gave it to a group of Willows who had gathered along the shore. He continued downstream and shared it with other trees and creatures.

When Beaver returned to the council grounds at Wawáwih, Coyote took two pieces of wood from a willow. He put the flat one on the ground and twisted the sharp point of the other into it, which caused the one below to flame up. All the Animal People were amazed to see fire made this way, and Coyote and Beaver gave each of the visitors pieces of the wood to take home.

Today Old Man Cedar still keeps watch where he stopped on the hilltop overlooking the confluence of the rivers. The closest stand of cedars is far away upstream. That shows how far he ran from the Conifers’ camp when Beaver stole their fire.

Gordon Fisher and Richard Scheuerman

The vivid and expressive language of this legend and trickster tale was evident to students, but we wanted students to make text-to-self, text-to-world, and text-to-text connections. We wanted students to use existing “what” and “how” frameworks to formulate their own authentic “why” questions about Native American culture. Why do legends matter to the contemporary Native American community?
Why are Indian creation legends valuable to the larger society?
Why do we have obligations to nature today?
Why are the moral virtues extolled in legends important to the larger society today?

The local settings of creation legends afforded students opportunities to make text-to-self connections with places and details of the story with which they were familiar. Because students now had insight into Nez Perce culture because of face-to-face encounters with Nez Perce elders, discussions and interpretations of local legends were particularly rich. Students were encouraged to reflect on various themes that emerged through tribal storytelling such as overcoming challenges and service to others above self. They then translated a theme they found in a legend to a story they composed about themselves. Additionally, students made text-to-text connections by connecting local legends to world mythology found in their basal literature anthology and in the literary canon, i.e., the Genesis account of creation and the Greek legend of Prometheus discovering fire.

The Trickle Effect
As Chief Seattle observed, “All things are connected.” This wisdom was applied in the ways that creation legends found their way into interdisciplinary study. Because Nez Perce elders have historically had a powerful influence in local conservation efforts and shared these efforts during school visits as they interpreted personal meaning of legends, their efforts were cited by students in science lessons on endangered species, native flora and fauna, and regional geology. When adjunct educator Carrie Jim Schuster passionately shared how Native Americans voices prevailed when government engineers sought to impound the state’s entire Columbia-Snake river system for hydroelectricity, her stories forced students to listen, and some began to care deeply.

With concentrated effort, stronger connections with Native American legends can similarly be made in mathematics, social studies, and the arts. One possible text for an interdisciplinary ecology unit for secondary students is I Am Salmon (One Reel Productions, 2000), a documentary on how the Nez Perce demonstrated that their ecological ideologies best serve humankind over time.

Our Collaborative Findings
Over years of collecting legends because of collaborations with Native American elders and our students, we have sought to develop insight into the time-honored values of the region’s first peoples. In so doing, we and many students have developed deep respect for Plateau Indian ideology and past and present tribal members. Some overarching themes we found in creation myths and in conversations with tribal elders and storytellers include:

1. Pervasive spirituality. Human experience is inextricably linked to sacred obligations and kinship within nature. Reliance upon Mother Earth for sustenance does not assume we exist apart from our “place” within the environmental system. (Even the use of names for family and band clusters was derived from the locative Sahaptin suffix –pam, or “people of” with indigenous geographic morphemes). Human beings are to be stewards or proprietors (vs. owners) of creation. Humanity exists in a covenant relationship, or sacred trust (ahtow’), with the Creator through which sustenance is provided to people, animals, and plants.

2. Environmental knowledge. We are to respectfully use and manage natural resources which requires intimate understandings of environmental systems, native species, and agricultural practices. The desire to get more than one needs leads individuals, groups, and even nations to harm land and life. The health of individuals and culture is related to the health of the environment—plains and forests, streams, rivers, beaches, and oceans.

3. Language and moral literature. Words contain special force implicit in sounds associated with natural forces, life forms, and landscapes (e.g., fire, wind, animals, personal names). Storytelling fosters
understanding of experience. Cultural knowledge transmitted through myth (ancient), tale (experiential), lore (anecdotal), and history provides practical and symbolic means to meaningfully relate to place and culture. These experiences develop moral sensibilities for respect, stewardship, reciprocity (sharing), cooperation, hospitality, and cleanliness.

4. Ceremony and celebration. Songs, dances, feasts, rites and other ceremonies recognize and commemorate relationships with one another, and connectedness within families, among generations, and between peoples and creation. (These celebrations of relationships are expressed in sacred architecture and cardinal directions of the Longhouse, and the Seven Drums of the Wáshat.) Ceremonies offer thanksgiving and teach obligations to animals and plants, landscapes and waters, and the Creator to reveal our place and role in the web of life. Ceremonial presentation in the Sacred First Foods Feast show the creation order and hierarchy of creature chiefs: water/kúš > fish (salmon/núsux) > animals (venison/yamaš) > plants (bitterroot/piyáxi) > fruits (huckleberries/wiwinu).

5. Artistic expression. Baskets, bags, clothing, gear, and other utilitarian goods are crafted from natural materials. They are generally decorated with motifs associated with their particular use, place of origin, or individual or family identity that impart a sacred influence beyond symbolic value. Specific practices were taught for the gathering and processing of plant materials often accompanied by songs and ceremonies. Through these preparations and in the actual weaving, sewing, and beading individuals learned about tribal culture, family ancestors, and individual spirituality.

6. Cyclical time. Aspects of physical and spiritual experience reoccur in a cyclical process that transcends time and circumstance and is not bound by linear progression. Time exists in a dimension beyond the course of chronological incidents. Events from the time of myth and personal qualities of persons from former generations are sometimes revealed in dreams or in the sounds of nature for those who listen, and lived out in contemporary experience. The hemp string “time ball” (ititamat), literally a “day counter”, or calendar, was tied with tiny markers of colored stones, bones, beads, and cloth to record significant events throughout one’s lifetime, and ultimately be buried with the owner. Just as events from an individual’s “season” might touch upon another from a different time and place, so humanity’s wisdom and experience may intersect through power of a sacred word, story, creature, or event.

7. Balanced innovation. Change can be beneficial when promoting the well-being of humans within the natural world system and among global cultures. Conflicts with the dominant culture have often arisen when such constraints are ignored in the name of short term gain or perceived higher needs. Plateau political leaders (“chiefs”, or miyowax) like Kamiakin welcomed Christian missionaries and adopted such agricultural and pastoral innovations as the raising of grains, crop irrigation, and selective breeding of livestock. Spiritual leaders (“medicine men”, or twatí) like Kotaiaqan and Smohalla spoke of the family of all mankind and for technological progress within the limits of moral obligations to creation.

The beauty of place-based literacy learning is that it values non-traditional texts and embraces community resources such as indigenous legends. As our Native American co-teachers have shared their fire with us, we and our students have benefitted from reframing pervasive individualistic and materialistic values.

References