

Indigenous Storytelling Tradition

Colville Confederated Tribes and the Plateau Culture Region
Educational Resources

Introduction to Indigenous Storytelling

This is an introduction to the traditional practice of Indigenous storytelling. Storytelling is an integral aspect of the local tribes and the tribes of the Plateau Culture Region. This introductory content can help educators understand how storytelling was used within the cultural context and therefore feel equipped to incorporate aspects of it into a modern day educational and cultural experience.

A brief overview: cultural oral traditions in a modern world

Storytelling was historically an oral tradition, which means it was knowledge that was transferred to others through speech or speaking rather than written down. This knowledge then became held in common by certain groups of people over many generations. Some old stories traditionally belonged to certain tribal communities or were stories belonging within certain families.

In modern times various tribes have developed cultural procedures to ensure that the transition from oral tradition into the public domain, for educational purposes, occurs in keeping with cultural protocol. The published stories that are now available have gone through variations of these types of processes. The book *Kou-Skelowh We Are The People, A Trilogy of Okanagan Legends*, published by Theytus Books, provides an example of this process in their editorial note to parents and teachers:

“One of the most valuable aspects of the Kou-skelowh Series is how it was

developed with Okanagan cultural protocol. In 1981 the Okanagan Elders Council was approached and asked if some traditional legends could be used in the project. When the Elders gave permission for three legends to be used, they were translated into English. The English versions were then taken back to the Elders Council for examination and edited until they were approved for educational use by Okanagan children.

The Elders Council was then asked if Theytus Books could have permission to publish the legends for sale in the book trade. After lengthy discussions, Theytus was granted permission on the grounds that several conditions were met, including that no individual would claim ownership of the legends or benefit from the sales. The Elders Council also named the Series Kou-skelowh, meaning “we are the people.” The series is “authorless” and copyrighted to the Okanagan Tribal Council.

The methodology that was used in the Kou-skelowh could stand as a model in which all possible concerns with Indigenous cultural protocol were dealt with in a proper manner, as well as an example of the uniqueness of Indigenous editorial practice.”

Storytelling is practiced in the winter months

- **Seasonal Round Activities and the Plateau Culture Region**
 - The tribes of the Plateau Culture Region lived within the cycle of the seasonal round. *A seasonal round is the annual cycle relating to tribal activities and food resources available at a given time of year. The seasonal round activities vary from region to region relating to weather patterns and natural resources. Abiding within the seasons, tribes were directly connected to the land in navigating their lives throughout the year.* For further information pertaining to the seasonal round and to view a seasonal round chart, follow this [\(Link\)](#).
 - Storytelling as a tribal activity was practiced in the winter months when snow was on the ground.
- **Coyote and the Colville** excerpt - *“In the winter people had more time to play. They had worked hard most of the year gathering stores of food to carry them*

through the winter when food gathering was difficult. With extra time, and since they often gathered in larger groups to winter, the Indian people developed many games, as well as storytelling. Storytelling was a favorite pastime. Usually each village had one or two men who knew all the legends and stories and who were good storytellers. These men often were invited to the homes of families to tell their stories for entertainment. The stories were more than entertainment, however, as they included many legends from which the people drew their beliefs, their religion and their customs and which explained their origins.” pg 28 [\(Link\)](#).

- **Beaver Steals Fire, A Salish Coyote Story** - Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes - Note to the Reader *“We must ask one special favor of those who use this book in the classroom or who otherwise read or discuss it aloud: Our traditional Coyote stories - the legends of Coyote - and the other animal people that appear throughout this book - should be told or discussed only during winter when snow is on the ground. The elders usually bring out the stories in November and put them away again when the snow is gone - usually by late February or March. Some say the stories are put away when the snakes come out. It is said that snakes will come to those who do not follow this custom or that cold weather will come during the warm months. Coyote stories, like other parts of our traditional way of life, are part of a seasonal cycle. By following this tradition readers, teachers, and students can enjoy this aspect of our culture - keeping and saving something for the time of year during which it belongs.”* - Salish and Pend d’Oreille Culture Committee

What storytelling was used for

- **Coyote and the Colville [\(Link\)](#)**
 - *“Much of what Indian children learn today by going to school, Indian children of long ago learned by listening to legends. Many of the legends here relate directly to geographical points in present-day Okanogan Stevens, Ferry and Chelan counties.”* p. 10
 - *“Storytelling was a favorite pastime...entertainment. The stories were more than entertainment, however, as they included many legends from which the people drew their beliefs, their religion and their customs and which explained their origins.”* p. 28

- **Upper Columbia River Book of Legends** [\(Link\)](#)
 - *“The Upper Columbia River Book of Legends is a link to our past. These legends are not considered “myths” by the people but rather are our spiritual and religious beliefs that connect us with the land. Our elders passed down these legends through the generations to their children and grandchildren. We are forever grateful to our ancestors and elders for their contributions and knowledge.” p. 5*
 - *“Each legend tells a story, provides historic information, relates to resource management, and provides moral and spiritual guidance. These stories and legends witness our ancestral claim to the land, to the mighty Columbia River and its tributaries, and to the resources found here. These landmark legends define our home.” p. 5-6*

- **Since Time Immemorial: WA State Tribes Curriculum Resources**
 - Long Before We Were Born - Communication section, Storytelling at 31:00 Minutes [\(Link\)](#)
 - Native American Stories and Science Education Connections, Roger Fernandes a citizen of the Lower Elwha Klallam Tribe [\(Link\)](#)

Storytelling characters

The main characters in the legends are the animals, referred to collectively as the Animal People. The Animal People prepare the way for the human tribes, which are referred to as the People-to-Be. Legends tell that the lands were first populated by the Animal People, the Animal People could speak a common language and had many powers.

“The legends are known as Coyote Stories, because the most wise and powerful of all animals created by the Great Chief was Coyote. He also was the most troublesome and the most inclined to get himself hurt, so he had special Powers. Coyote tamed the earth and some of the creatures. He placed salmon in certain waters and showed the Animal People how to catch the salmon and prepare them to eat. This knowledge

the Animal People later passed on to the humans who came from Beaver's flesh. The legends tell how the Animal People were preparing for the People-to-Be. The Animal People even stole fire from the Upper Country so the People-to-Be could warm themselves and cook in the winters-to-be."

Coyote and the Colville pg 11 ([Link](#))

In the Plateau Culture Region, Coyote, the Animal People and the People-to-Be are a common theme used. Whereas some of the different language groups or villages had their own variations to their story themes and characters emphasized.

Places to find stories

- Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation, Upper Columbia River Book of Legends ([Link](#))
- Coyote and the Colville part II ([Link](#))
- Coyote Stories By Mourning Dove
- Coyote Finishes the People Second Edition By Wendell George
- Indian Legends of the Pacific Northwest By Ella E. Clark
- Coyote Was Going There - compiled and edited by Jarold Ramsey
- Kou-Skelowh We Are The People: A Trilogy of Okanagan Legends - Theytus Books
- The Great Winter Dance By: Patrick Finley-Bragg Marich and Lynn E. Bragg

*These resources are available to borrow either from the LR Library or the Indian Education Program.

Ideas for teaching with Indigenous stories

- Examine the story
 - What were the main points of the story, was there a lesson to be learned?
 - Did the story reference a traditional landscape or natural resource?
 - Did the story teach about an aspect of the developing cultural way of life

for the tribes?

- Familiarize the students with the Animal People characters and their natural environment
 - What type of wildlife live in the Plateau Culture Region?
 - The CCT Book of Legends table of contents provides many of the Animal People character names ([Link](#))
 - The CCT Tribal Language Department's 3 active curriculum resources provide the names and audio for the wildlife
 - Okanogan language group ([Link](#))
 - Moses-Columbia language group ([Link](#))
 - Nez Perce language group ([Link](#))
 - For comparison, what type of wildlife live in other Indigenous culture regions?
 - What are the major natural landmarks or natural resources?
 - E.g. Mountains, bodies of water, salmon
- Create a storytelling atmosphere
 - Storytime can be a time to learn, but also a time to facilitate being together and sharing in a creative space
 - Stories can be sensory, a way to create a scene or visual art - consider the lighting, seating space or possibly a crackling fire playing on the screen
 - Remind that storytelling is a yearly activity, similar to other seasonal activities, characters can be revisited time and again
 - Excerpt from *Coyote Was Going There* by Jarold Ramsey

“Begin with the right setting. It is a deep winter night along the Columbia River...Outside the lodge, the wind blows full of snow; snow covers the canoes, the fishing platforms, the drying racks, the trails east and west along the river...Inside, acrid smoke from the big fire drifts this way and that: and more faintly, there comes the smell of food long since safely gathered, dried, smoked, stored in corners and hung up along the ridgepole. It is winter here, and there is little for the People to do but stay indoors and try to keep warm. It is the season of stories...” p. xvii

- Hands-on projects
 - Theater: shows, shadow boxes, puppets, felt boards
 - Small group story projects to present

- Pinterest wildlife craft ideas (woodland characters produces useful ideas)
 - Literacy games
 - Garden of Relatives Coloring Book ([Link](#))
- Explore modern settings to tell new stories with the old characters and old way of helping in everyday life