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Hands Back, Hands Forward: Expanding the Circle of Indigenous Storyworkers

Jo-ann Archibald Q'um Q'um Xiiem

Ey Swayel (Good Day, in the Halq'emeylem language). My Indigenous name is Q'um Q'um Xiiem, which means Strong Clear Water. I am a member of the Stó:lō Nation, specifically the Soowahlie First Nation¹, adjacent to Cultus Lake in southwestern British Columbia. I also have ancestry in St'at'imc Nation, Xa'xliip First Nation, near Lillooet, in the interior of British Columbia.

An Indigenous teaching that has guided my life, both professionally and personally, comes from Tsimilano, Elder Dr. Vincent Stogan of x^wməθk^wəyəm (Musqueam).² He was a leader, teacher, and mentor to many. At the beginning of our gatherings, we often formed a circle. Tsimilano had us hold our left hand out with the palm facing upward to signal the respectful action of reaching back to receive the teachings—knowledge and values—from the ancestors and those who have traveled on our pathway before us. It is our responsibility to think of ways to put these teachings into our everyday actions. He then had us extend our right hand with the palm facing downward to symbolize sharing those teachings with others, particularly the younger generation, which is also an action of reciprocity. We then joined hands in the circle to unite the past, present, and future.

In this reflective essay, I use Tsimilano's Hands Back, Hands Forward teaching to discuss an Indigenous pedagogical approach called Indigenous Storywork³ (Archibald, 2008), which emerged from my research with Stó:lō and other Indigenous Elders and cultural knowledge-holders.

HANDS BACK FOR UNDERSTANDING AND DOING INDIGENOUS STORYWORK

In the early 1990s, I reached back to the Stó:lō Elders, who in the 1970s had formed the Coqualeetza Elders' Group for cultural reclamation and revitalization purposes, along with other projects.⁴ I had established learning relationships with many of these Elders during the late 1970s and early 1980s, when we worked on an elementary school curriculum project that included some of their remembered stories. The focus of that curriculum was to identify Stó:lō stories for elementary school students and to develop story books for this purpose, along with cultural resources and inquiry lessons. This time, I was ready to learn more about ways to make meaning from and with stories, which we had only briefly introduced in the earlier curriculum.

The Stó:lō Elders, Coast Salish Elders, and other storytellers mentored me through talks about the epistemological nature of Indigenous stories, explaining how stories were a part of their everyday lives and how they learned from stories. I also spent much time in nature—especially along river banks, by the ocean, and in forests—where I developed a sense of reverence for both nature and the power of stories to educate and heal from the intergenerational impact of colonization. The seven Indigenous Storywork (ISW) principles of respect, reverence, responsibility, reciprocity, holism, inter-relatedness,

1 I use the term, Stó:lō Nation, for broader cultural and geographical purposes. The Stó:lō traditional and unceded territory extends from Langley to Yale, British Columbia. There are various Stó:lō political organizations, one of which is called, Stó:lō Nation that provides various services to 11 Stó:lō communities: www.stolonation.bc.ca

2 x^wməθk^wəyəm (Musqueam) is a First Nation located in the Vancouver area of British Columbia, which is a small part of their traditional territory. See the Musqueam website for more information: www.musqueam.bc.ca

3 Indigenous Storywork is a theoretical, methodological, and pedagogical framework. For the purpose of this essay, its pedagogical nature is emphasized. See this website for more information: indigenoustorywork.com

4 My historical reflective perspectives are detailed in my book, *Indigenous Storywork: Educating the Heart, Mind, Body, and Spirit*, published in 2008 by UBC Press.

and synergy emerged from my lived experiences. As I lived the ISW principles in my educational and research practices, my understandings of them deepened. Along the way, I also needed to name the Indigenous framework for these principles.

The name, Indigenous Storywork, came about in this way. Years ago, in Stó:lō and Coast Salish gatherings, the Spokesperson, who facilitates the cultural work on behalf of the hosting family, would say, “My dear ones, the work is about to begin.” When the guests heard these words, they knew that it was time to give serious attention to the activities. With Indigenous stories, I thought that serious attention was needed for understanding the beauty and power of Indigenous traditional and life experience stories to educate the heart, mind, body, and spirit. My experience with educational systems at all levels was disheartening because of how Indigenous ways of knowing and being, particularly stories, were excluded, belittled, or misunderstood. I reached back once more to Indigenous ways and brought the notion of work together with story to signal an epistemological and pedagogical change, guided by Indigenous Storywork.

HANDS FORWARD FOR INDIGENOUS STORYWORKERS

In 2017, I retired from my professional work at the University of British Columbia, but like the Stó:lō Elders, my commitment to continuing this intergenerational storied learning process continues. In 2019, I joined hands with public school teachers, school district educational leaders, and the Coqualeetza Cultural Education Centre (Coqualeetza), to revitalize the educational implementation of Stó:lō stories, which the Coqualeetza Elders had developed for school curriculum in the 1980s and 1990s. The curriculum was named the Stó:lō Sítel. In the Halq’emeyelm language, sítel means a basket used to store treasured items. Those who worked on this curriculum considered the Stó:lō stories to be like treasure to be cared for and valued.

The Elders had carefully remembered, documented, and guided the representation of their stories so that all students had the opportunity to learn about Stó:lō history, culture, and contributions from Stó:lō perspectives. Over the years, a part of this curriculum, in the form of story books, sat on library book shelves or in closets. Teachers who found them often commented that the books looked outdated and that they were not sure how to use them with current curriculum guidelines. However, there were a few Indigenous/Stó:lō educators who knew the timeless value of these stories and were keen to mentor teachers in Indigenous story pedagogy and to work cooperatively for this purpose.

We formed a Stó:lō Sítel Working Group of about 15 school district and community-based educators where we learned about the Indigenous Storywork principles; with K-12 teachers from various school districts, we developed story-based pedagogies that were place-based/in nature, experiential, inter- and intra-generational, and included Indigenous community members. Stó:lō Sítel Working Group members and teachers then shared these pedagogies and sparked more ideas, as well as discussed challenges. Some of the Stó:lō Sítel Working Group members were descendants of the original Coqualeetza Elders’ Group who had developed the Stó:lō stories.

My role with the Stó:lō Sítel Working Group was, and continues to be, both a mentor to and learner with them. I was fortunate to learn from the original Elders, which is similar to the Hands Back teaching. These Elders mentored me through storied and experiential pedagogies. Then, I had the responsibility to place the Elders’ teachings into educational practices. I developed the Indigenous Storywork framework, I engaged in ISW, and I shared its pedagogical potential through various mediums and contexts. In extending my hand forward to the Stó:lō Sítel Working Group and K-12 teachers, who are current-day storyworkers, I have made a personal commitment to continue the Elders’ various teachings with the hope that many more storyworkers will join this Indigenous Storywork circle, thereby uniting—once again—the past, present, and future.

I RAISE MY HANDS IN THANKS AND RESPECT

It has been 50 years since the Stó:lō Elders began to collectively remember, reclaim, and revitalize their Stó:lō knowledge, especially their language, culture, and stories. Many Elders have said that their knowledges and stories were put to sleep during the decades when it was illegal in Canada⁵ to practice Indigenous cultural traditions, and where Indigenous languages and culture were denied in school systems, particularly the Indian residential schools. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada called these actions cultural genocide (2015). Yet a core group of Elders kept this precious knowledge alive in their hearts, minds, bodies, and spirits until it was safe to openly share their stories.

It has been heartwarming for me to realize that some descendants of these Elders have become educators and cultural knowledge-holders who are continuing cultural learning that includes the storywork process with their family members, learners of all ages, and others. This inter- and intra-generational engagement is a form of Indigenous epistemology and pedagogy. It is a long-term commitment and it is difficult to maintain in Western-based educational systems that do not recognize or value the pedagogical and educational significance of Indigenous stories. Another important source of stories, often overlooked, is found in Indigenous community-based cultural centres.

The Coqualeetza Cultural Education Centre was established in 1973 by various Stó:lō lands/communities as a not-for-profit charitable organization to offer cultural programs determined by Stó:lō people (Archibald, 2008). The Elders' group became a core program of Coqualeetza, and it continues today. This centre has provided cultural hands-on activities, such as basket-making, cedar bark collection, plant gathering, and summer camps to preserve fish. It has also undertaken documentation of many aspects of Stó:lō culture, language, and history, and has offered cultural education to many. Over the years, a rich trove of archival material has been collected that includes cassettes and videotapes, transcripts of individual interviews with many Stó:lō Elders and cultural knowledge-holders, and photos of places in Stó:lō territory, especially along river systems with documentation about the Stó:lō place names.

Coqualeetza is beginning a longer term project to digitize the earlier recorded material that is now an outdated technology, making it inaccessible to many. Updating the technological accessibility and format of archival material will offer more resource material for Stó:lō community/family members and teachers. There are many more Indigenous cultural centres across Canada that serve the same important purpose as Coqualeetza. They are an invaluable knowledge source and educational support for developing Indigenous pedagogies and curriculum resources despite their ongoing challenges of securing recognition of their expertise and sufficient funding for their educational projects.

In Stó:lō tradition, at gatherings, guests show appreciation and respect for the good work of people when we raise up our hands with our palms open. I raise my hands in thanks and respect to the Coqualeetza Elders who followed the tradition of sharing their knowledges with current and future generations. These Elders enacted self-determination by leading and directing how their stories were told and represented for educational purposes. Most importantly, their family and other community members have been taught their Elders' values and stories, which continues the cycle of learning. I raise my hands in thanks and respect to Indigenous community-based cultural centres for demonstrating persistence in continuing to revitalize Indigenous knowledges.

Tsimilano told us that the Indigenous circle of caring, sharing, and knowing always has room for anyone who wants to join hands in this way. The expanding circle of Indigenous Storyworkers will continue to carry on the Hands Back, Hands Forward teaching, and it has room to join hands with you.

5 From 1884 to 1951, the Canadian federal government outlawed the Potlatch, which was a major cultural system for First Nations people, where cultural laws, kinship, history, stories/dances/songs, marriages, births, deaths, and much more were either noted or carried out (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996).

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