Decolonizing Through Storytelling

Chi'XapKaid (Michael Pavel, Skokomish Nation)

As teachers, we are mentors of our children for all time. We labor to stand against anger, sadness, criticism, and defeat. Our hearts shall be full of peace and our minds filled with urgency for the welfare of our children. With endless patience, we embrace our duty. Our firmness shall be tempered with tenderness. Our words and actions shall be marked by calm deliberation.—Linda Sue Warner, Superintendent, Milwaukee Indian School, 2002

A. Purpose
B. Personal Narrative
C. Relevance and Support
D. At Least One Decolonization Strategy
E. Conclusion
F. Suggested Readings

A. Purpose

This chapter draws on personal experiences, selected literature, and ancestral teachings that provide a framework on how to decolonize our Native societies through education. It begins with a personal narrative to provide the reader with (a) my own personal awareness of decolonization, and (b) the methods of decolonization that I employ in my personal life and professional work. The methods of decolonization are illuminated in the section dealing with storytelling. Although pertinent literature will be reviewed and incorporated throughout, the primary information is derived from my elders and uncle, who work tirelessly to maintain the dignified presence of American Indian and Alaska Native people in today's society. I conclude with a summary and closing comments.

B. Personal Narrative

I was selected as the lead male dancer in the newly formed Twana Dance Group on the Skokomish Reservation back in 1973; it was a thirteen-year-old boy's first step into cultural renewal and celebration. No one could remember the last group of community members that had gathered together to sing the family songs and dance the family dances that are a part of our ancestral teachings. Although there was excitement, there was also doubt and resistance, even competing external interests within the group (for

instance, people wanted to learn about their culture, others felt that traditional culture was not important, and people in the dance group had other responsibilities with school).

But my uncle, subiyay (Bruce Miller), would have none of it. We were either going to remember our culture, or our culture would be doomed to gradual dismemberment, until there would be nothing deeply rooted in our ancestry that we would be able to call our own. *If we failed to remember our ancestors, our freedom would be somebody's freedom, not our own. Our destiny, the destiny of someone else. Our ancestors will not even be able to recognize us on the other side: we would have changed so much.* My uncle is a gifted individual who knew that the words he spoke were the spirit of our ancestors. If we learned the songs, the dances, and the stories, then we would have a chance to retain the distinct social character that is uniquely us. Simply said, we would have a chance.

So Uncle gathered us together—my aunts, cousins, sisters, brothers, and anyone else who was interested—and begin introducing us to the ancestral teachings that would change all of our lives and the destiny of our community, and join us to the worldwide Indigenous movement to embrace one's cultural heritage. At the time, our world-renowned basketry was held in trust by only two elder women and one man; our language was spoken by only a handful of people; there was no evidence of contemporary ancestral-spiritual practices; and there were few traditional artists, and very little (if any) Native exposure in the school experience.

Our traditional culture at the time was embedded in intertribal athletic events, and we were reveling in the afterglow of pan-Indian participation in and appreciation for the civil rights movement. Redbone was singing "Come and Get Your Love," and we were engaged in a struggle to assert our treaty rights. I remember one hot day during my fifteenth summer, the word got out that the state fish and game agents were confiscating a tribal member's fishing net. The first reaction among a few of us young rez men was that we were going to be part of the solution.

I rode shotgun with my cousin, who was seventeen, and we drove fast down a windy road in a rusted pickup headed to the fishing docks, *because we were going to be part of the solution.* All the while, I was firing off a Colt .22 pistol at vague passing targets of some imaginary enemy. We skidded into the dock's parking lot and jumped out in mid-stop to see that another one of my cousins was surrounded by several agents. He turned to us and shouted, "Let's take my net back, cuz!" Then he stiffed-armed two of the agents in the chest so hard, they fell to the ground.

"Indeed this resistance will eventually succeed. And it will be finally successful when people are in total control of all the means of their physical, economical, political, cultural, psychological and spiritual survival, so we have to strengthen our capacity, and that of our children, to resist the evil."

—Ngugi wa Thiong'o

We pushed our way past the third agent who shouted at me in a paternalistic manner, "You'd better not touch that net, boy!" I shouted back, "You're going to hell for what you're doing to our people," and even today, I remember how long I had been waiting to say that to somebody since I began to understand racial oppression and discrimination. It gave me strength as I leaped into the agents' patrol boat and started unloading a 200-fathom gill net, 120 meshes deep, out of the boat and into another tribal member's truck. Big-ass pile of net, believe me. It was a tangled mess made worse because the agents had hauled it in with seaweed, branches, fish, and all.

We managed to get the net, and all of us roared off, only to be followed by the police and game agents. My cousin and I were behind the truck with the net and were able to stall the authorities by blocking the

road with our truck long enough to let the truck with the net get away. We relented when we faced shotgun barrels and pistols aimed at our heads, supported by threatening shouts of, "Get that goddamn vehicle out of the way." It was a strange feeling; even as we got in our truck to get out of the way, I remember vividly thinking, "I am not afraid to die for my country, and it's not right how they treat the Indian people."

All the while, I kept singing and dancing, and learning more from my ancestors who left the stories behind for us to hear, and trying to remember all that I could.

At sixteen, I joined four people to sponsor the first traditional naming ceremony on the Skokomish Reservation in more than eighty years. At seventeen, I was selected to prepare and carry the salmon that would be ceremonially returned to the river in the first Salmon Ceremony held on our reservation in more than 100 years. When I was eighteen, a local reporter asked to interview me, saying it would be for a feature article on senior students—the kind that showcases an outstanding student's achievements and aspirations. Days later a two-page article appeared in the county newspaper, with the headline, "Mike Pavel Hates White People." Well, my feature article was controversial given the headline, to say the least. It was asking a lot for the reader to overlook the headline and wade through the middle of the story, to find out that what I said was something like, "I hate white people who think that all Indians are drunk or lazy. I know a lot more white people who are worse drunks, drug addicts, and beat their women. I also know a lot of good Indian people."

All the while, I kept singing and dancing, and learning more from my ancestors who left the stories behind for us to hear, and trying to remember all that I could.

I went through a rigorous initiation into a traditional society when I was nineteen, shortly after the time when the American Indian Religious Freedom Act was passed (silly to think that one of this country's basic tenets is freedom of religion and that we needed such an act in the year of our Lord, 1978). At twenty-one, I graduated from a prestigious private university, and then took a low-paying job with an Indian employment and training consortium of small tribes, only to move on to another low-paying tribal planning position after a few years.

All the while, I kept singing and dancing, and learning more from my ancestors who left the stories behind for us to hear, and trying to remember all that I could.

My professional experience began in 1985, the year I left the reservation in Washington State to attend graduate school in the Southwest. I earned my Ph.D. and graduated with awards, and got my first tenure-track faculty position at an esteemed university. During my first few years as a faculty member, I felt unwelcome and endured constant slights, my presence in the academy being continually questioned. You get the idea. If you don't, I am tired of telling much more because it plays out like a bad record, so you will just have to use your imagination. What I will tell you is that I met good people who encouraged me to remember who I was and what my purpose was as an American Indian faculty member in higher education: to fundamentally seek solutions that would promote the higher education of American Indian and Alaska Native People.

All the while, I kept singing and dancing, and learning more from my ancestors who left the stories behind for us to hear, and trying to remember all that I could.

I did well, ignoring the criticisms of those who said that Indians could not do research on Indians. I excelled, despite people telling me that I needed to publish in top-tier journals and not in the second-, third-, fourth-, and fifth-rate journals that focused on Native issues. I became a highly respected teacher while using unconventional and nontraditional forms of instruction. I enjoyed myself even when my colleagues did not invite me to their parties or acknowledge my contributions in faculty meetings.

"We" had a chance because the spirit of my ancestors was close to me. It was my decision to succeed in the mainstream higher-education establishment because it was very apparent that the success of American Indian and Alaska Native People is not at the highest priority level of those who fund, govern, administer, and teach in America's finest universities.

Note that I do not care who reads or hears what I just said. I live with it every day.

All the while, I kept singing and dancing, and learning more from my ancestors who left the stories behind for us to hear, and trying to remember all that I could.

C. Relevance and Support

While the storytelling of our ancestral and contemporary histories is important throughout and in every context of our lives, it possibly has our greatest opportunity for impact in the schooling of our children. In 2004, Pavel and Reyhner completed a review of literature for a national study of Native teacher preparation, entitled, *Research Review: Addressing the Language and Cultural Needs of Indigenous Communities.* Their historical overview describes the missionary, military, and political ill-treatment that was intended either to exterminate the Indians or wipe clear their minds of anything to do with their ancestral heritage. Assessment of early teacher knowledge as well as curricular and instructional developments had no application to Native Peoples or Native ways of knowing and learning. It was not until the emergence of tribal self-determination and self-governance that more sustained application of Native culture in the education of Native Peoples became more evident. This latter event in the Indigenous histories of Native Peoples has become part of our story: a story of struggle and success, of risk and rewards, of humor and sadness.

In the early 1990s, the Indian Nations at Risk (INAR) Task Force and the White House Conference on Indian Education made possible the gathering of personal stories by many Native students who attended schools that did not promote Indigenous cultural and spiritual development. Essentially, no Indigenous stories or gifted Native storytellers were in the schools or involved in educating the majority of our children. Overall, these government reports, in addition to a growing body of literature, lent strong support for the need for linguistically and culturally appropriate education for Native Peoples.

Whatever their training, teachers who have been responsive to their students have been more successful than those who have slavishly taught from textbooks and curriculums that may or may not reflect the culture of their students. It is long past the time to remember what Luther Standing Bear (1933–1978) declared about young Indians needing to be "doubly educated" so that they learned "to appreciate both their traditional life and modern life."

The Pavel and Reyhner review also provides a section on Native teacher preparation that offers additional insights regarding (a) curriculum and instruction, and (b) the importance of language and culture. Curricular and instructional practices in mainstream American schools careen back and forth, from very restrictive teacher-centered approaches to anarchic child-centered focus, while public and political support for Native curricular and instructional approaches has wavered back and forth throughout U.S. history. The constant throughout this history is that teachers who develop effective classroom strategies for American Indian and Alaska Native students can do so by developing a better understanding of language and cultural factors that affect student-learning outcomes.

Whichever strategies are used, critical and caring reflection will help teachers show genuine respect for cultural teachings that relate to autonomy, authority, diversity, and joy in learning. To guide teachers of Native students, Reyhner and Jacobs advocate a wisdom-centered approach that embodies knowledge "that is possessed by elders, embedded in Native languages, revealed by plants and animals, and expressed mysteriously in ceremony." To help them in the process of receiving the wisdom of elders, Kincheloe recommends that "teachers must possess an anthropological view of the educational process. Such a perspective would help the teacher analyze and interpret society by providing a conceptual framework for raising questions and making observations." Simply put, teachers need to know the stories of the Indigenous Peoples.

Development of Native-oriented curriculum and instruction should be done in the context that cultural disintegration in Native societies has and will continue to inhibit the transformative and harmonic nature of

knowledge sharing that comes from traditional Native culture. As Gordon and Boseker explain, "We Anglos can learn from Native Americans and how those understandings can improve education for all students, both Indian and non-Indian. Educators should be listening to Native American people more carefully and modifying their teaching accordingly."

The issue is no longer whether Native language and culture should have a role in developing educational strategies for American Indians and Alaska Natives. Rather, the prevailing sentiment throughout American Indian and Alaska Native communities—both rural and urban—is that Native language and culture should be an important part of the education system. The timeless knowledge inherent in the spirituality (a sense of interconnectedness with all) and reciprocity (a sense giving back to others or restoring balance) of Native culture are vital to Indian learning and to enjoying increased support from the public at large. "Guiding students toward a deep understanding about the values of their cultural worldview and how it applies to local and global issues is one way to facilitate a spiritual perspective that honors input from the community," say Reyhner and Jacobs.

In summary, there are two broad themes in the literature that can be tapped to gain further insights about the intersection between language and culture, and Native schooling. First is that to integrate Native language and culture into the public education system, teachers must grapple with the potential of language and cultural loss, look for alternative approaches to education, and recognize the incompatibility of Western mainstream public schooling and Native methods of education. The reality is that Native languages and traditional cultures are severely threatened. Most approaches incorporating Native language and culture into public schooling are alternative. Moreover, there are myriad governance and management differences that separate Native education from public schooling.

The second theme involves preserving Native language and culture, redefining Native education, understanding the ecology of Native education, and creating community- and place-based education that convey Native language and culture. These core values can be the foundation for (a) developing a philosophy, a mission, and purpose of schooling; (b) creating governance and administrative practices in collaboration with Native communities; and (c) training teachers to incorporate relevant and appropriate curriculum for Native students.

Research on holistic approaches to learning concludes that Native students are more successful academically when they can be active learners and when teachers act as facilitators and coaches. Educators should take a bottom-up approach that begins with them studying their students and their homes and communities. This approach can begin with a very brief history of Indian education, and then move on to reviewing how, why, what, and from whom American Indian students learn, including research on brain dominance, learning styles, whole language, testing, motivation, and discipline. I believe that storytelling is a natural approach to education and that much of what has been missing in the education of Indigenous children is the cultural knowledge and appropriateness that is embedded in the stories of their people.

D. At Least One Decolonization Strategy

It is both presumptuous and unrealistic of me to share an entire set of strategies that will decolonize the Native Peoples. However, my uncle taught me that for the ancestors of Indigenous Peoples, shared knowledge of cultural concepts was a tool for survival. The American Indian and Alaska Native People, for example, developed a belief in a story symbology to create a sophisticated educational system. My ancestors believed that the plants and animals were created first and became the first teachers of our people. Animals, in particular, experienced all the trials and tribulations necessary to survive. The plants' and animals' life experiences became the teachings upon which humans would base their culture; they would become the curriculum. The best way to convey that curriculum was through storytelling. Therefore, storytelling became an instructional technique, enabling the listeners to

visualize the knowledge that needed to be preserved and passed on to future generations.

Before the introduction of written language, grandparents and gifted storytellers distributed all knowledge orally. It was through their living breath that the ancient tales of their ancestors were passed on and remembered. The stories taught the young people how to learn from the environment and their life experiences. This learning style promoted the same analytical, cognitive, and retentive skills that are necessary to succeed in the contemporary educational system. As the skills associated with this oral tradition have eroded, however, the old stories have almost disappeared, and along with them much of the people's cultural resiliency. *If we failed to remember our ancestors, our freedom would be somebody's freedom, not our own. Our destiny, the destiny of someone else. Our ancestors will not even be able to recognize us on the other side: we would have changed so much.* Their can be no sovereignty for Native People when there is no cultural distinctiveness, regardless of how important a person feels economic development and assimilation are to paying the bills. You cannot buy freedom with jobs, and you cannot protect the environment for future generations by cutting down the trees or using up the water today.

"Peace is impossible in a world dominated by imperialism. Peace is impossible in a world guided by the ideology and practice of racism. Hence the struggle for peace in the world must be a concerted struggle against racism and imperialism."
—Ngugi wa Thiong'o

What to do? One of the many strategies to decolonize the Indigenous Peoples is to remember the ancestral teachings and master the art of storytelling. My uncle taught me that ritual and ceremony are important components to children being able to develop their visualization process. The visualization process is part of children's ability to construct a sense of reality that they could trust; Uncle often reinforcing the point by saying, "Seeing is believing."

The storytelling experience is also enhanced by our sense of smell and by songs that awaken the spirit. Our sense of smell, stimulated by the burning of incense, can induce a powerful learning experience because it prepares the mind to receive specific information. To our animal people, the sense of smell is still highly developed and a means of communication (for example, finding the faint trace of one's path hours or even days before, telling each when it is time to mate, and allowing the salmon to find their birthplace). To the human people, aromas invoke the memories of our past that transcend our own childhood to encompass the memories of our ancestors. We can associate a sense of smell to everything that deserves to be remembered, pleasant or unpleasant.

Songs help us to remember important teachings and events, and even help to identify who we are in the world. We often sing the most important concept of a story in compositions of four or fewer short lines. Before the invention of writing, singing and chanting allowed our ancestors to remember phenomenal amounts of information pertaining to our genealogy, family history, inherited rights, sacred ceremonies, and the great sagas of our ancestral heroes.

When my people, the Skokomish, are ready to perform a ceremony or relive the oral history of our ancestors, we use the aroma from sacred plants like the cedar to prepare the path as well as songs to help convey the teachings embedded in the words and work that take place. Uncle explained to me that to Native Peoples, the burning of incense before and during ritual and ceremony is a key element in the recognition of important information. These acts perform a validation to what is about to take place.

Uncle teaches that the basic components of storytelling are sacred words that are like ceremonial keys to another dimension. In some ways, we might compare them to magical incantations. What they are, are symbolic metaphors or verbal keys. Each one will unlock the spatial door to another dimension. We call them

se'owa (the sacred words, words of law); something like "God is the word, and the word is God." Some of these words are:

- ha'bu (invokes the invitation to tell a story)
- sha'bu (the story itself)
- sha'but3d (storyteller)
- tu di tu hakW (from the ancient memories)
- sXW3XWi?a'b (bringing back the breath of our ancestors)

I offer these knowing that most, if not all, who read these words may not be able to correctly pronounce the words; the lowercase and uppercase mean different things as well as the 3 and ' marks. However, there might be the gifted among you who naturally pronounce the terms correctly because the spirit has chosen you for something great. If not, Native People engaged in remembering their ancestors are free to visit us on the Skokomish Reservation and learn more. The main purpose of sharing these words is that, from my experience, every Indigenous culture has words that are sacred, open the way, and prepare the mind for storytelling. We sing the anthem of our traditional society throughout the year to keep the ancestors close to us:

- p3t t scH3lal (from the time of the ancestor—history, in the beginning)
- tulas 3b3b d3xW (received right where we are now)
- tid sHabu (my sacred stories)

There are other important techniques to storytelling, and Uncle has shared these as things to remember.

- Gesticulation, or the use of nonverbal gestures, adds more meaning to the spoken word. It allows us to shade, stretch, highlight, and add texture to the word. (Practice embellishing gestures.)
- Body language, or the use of facial expressions and eye contact, has a strong impact on storytelling. The facial expression exemplifies the mood of the moment. (Practice facial expressions like anger, sadness, worry, and happiness.)
- Articulation is essential because stories are important, and the storyteller must enunciate clearly, without running the words together or being too complicated. (Practice verbal exercises and saying things clearly.)
- Pauses allow time for the listener to visualize what has just been said and internalize it in one's memory. (Practice saying a sentence and waiting a few seconds before uttering another sentence.)
- Pace and repetition means that important information is never blurted out but is shared in a slow, enunciated, rhythmic, ceremonial speech pattern. (Practice saying something in a manner that conveys, "I am telling you something really important," and say it two or three times.)
- Voice is the great repertoire of things that you hear in nature or in your own personal experience and allow for a greater degree of voice characterizations. (Practice saying something from a variety of animals or what a tree might sound like.)

A primary reason Native students give for dropping out of school is that school is boring. I have never seen or experienced boredom when a gifted Indigenous storyteller is sharing knowledge through a story. On contrary, I have seen Indigenous children captivated by the gripping details of what was being conveyed by a good story. My guess is that all teachers, not just teachers of Indigenous children, would benefit from being good storytellers.

However, what about the Indigenous Peoples who have been so colonized that their ancestral stories are all but forgotten? This situation is so pervasive—so many stories have already been forgotten and more are on the verge of being forgotten—that it has to be addressed in a proactive and creative manner. I would say that we, as individuals and communities, need to begin documenting and telling our stories, much as I tried to do in the beginning of this chapter.

ACTIVITY:

Here is a general guide to creating our own stories; use the themes of love and relationships as an example. Identify all the experiences you have faced and align each along themes of important information you want to convey. (An example is provided.)

Experience	Theme
positive bedtime rituals	love of a parent

For example, love and companionship are vital to the health of our people. However, the effects of colonization have so disrupted our feelings of love, that our concept of a healthy relationship has often deteriorated to a point where our children grow up expecting that two people in a relationship is characterized by abuse. This does not have to be, and to change it will require that we start educating or training our youth about ideals of love and how this generates healthy companionship. To me this means developing a relationship that culminates in good parenting, where both parents make an effort to create a positive relationship that promotes good child-rearing practices.

ACTIVITY:

For stories we direct to our young, we can supplement the main characters with animals so that children can relate to the situations more readily. Animal characters in stories are a lot like puppets in theater, as children tend to focus more on puppets than real human characters. I think it is because children are more fascinated with imagined reality than concrete reality. In a story of love and companionship, I might choose animals that mate for life (for instance, swans, eagles, wolves) to model what it is like to develop healthy and sustainable relationships. The story on love and companionship can have contrasting animal characters that mimic some serious relationship issues in our society (such as animal fathers who abandon their mate soon after conception and never participate in raising the children). For this activity, compose a story based on one of your positive experiences surrounding the theme of love and companionship. What experience will your story address?

Who will your characters be?

Break up the story into segments so that children can more easily remember and understand the plot. Continuing with the example of love and companionship, the first segment might be about respecting or not respecting yourself as demonstrated by good eating, grooming, and behavioral practices. What will your first segment be about?

The second segment could be about seeing and admiring the same qualities in other people, contrasted with situations where poor qualities are overlooked in hopes that you may be able to make things better. What will your second segment be about?

The third segment may be something about courtship, and about the expectations that being in love should cultivate a healthy relationship versus a one-night stand or tendency to move from one relationship to the next with no true love at all. What will your third segment be about?

The fourth or final segment to the story should center on the beauty of being in a loving relationship over time, and what that generally brings to the family and community. On the other hand, the story may show the things we might miss if there are no enduring relationships in our communities. What will your fourth segment be about?

I am sure that there are many ways to approach the compilation and retelling of stories concerning a particular Indigenous community. Indigenous writers, who have been creating a growing body of literature, serve as a rich resource of stories. I also have benefited from hearing or reading about such stories and have been able to use the stories in and out of class to convey lessons important to succeeding in life. We should be free to share our own stories with people to encourage them to create their own.

E. Conclusion

The living breath of our ancestors is kept alive through the stories we remember. In doing so, we remember who we are, what our history is, how we behave, how we treat other people, what is important in life, what our worldview is, who the future generations are, who our heroes are, and how to believe in the spirit. The first created (the plant people) taught us how to learn from the environment as well as our own life experiences. This learning style promoted the same

analytical, cognitive, and retentive skills that are necessary to succeed in this contemporary society. The applied knowledge skills associated with the oral tradition have nearly eroded with the sovereignty of the Native Peoples. The old traditional stories that once honed these skills have almost disappeared under the oppressive weight of colonialism. Many Native Peoples refuse to be washed away and are strong enough to triumph over any burden.

However, life need not be so dismal. Storytelling can be a form of play, where our children learn to enjoy the life they are living and give light to ancestors who want to be remembered by future generations. It can be fun, exciting, entertaining, and challenging to the intellect, and serve to unite the people. This is especially important, because Native Peoples emphasize a group-oriented learning mode. Moreover, our destiny is inherently tied to the plants and animals; their fate is our fate, their solution our solution. Decolonizing our minds then becomes an epic journey, as we travel through time and folding space: a journey where we join together the past, present, and future all at the same moment. This magical moment is created through storytelling. An experience invoked by breathing the words of our ancestors to teach us today what we need to do to survive into tomorrow.

F. Suggested Readings

S. L. Gordon and B. J. Boseker, "Enriching Education for Indian and Non-Indian Students," *Journal of Thought* 19, no. 3 (1984):143–48.

T. S. Kincheloe, "The Wisdom of the Elders: Cross-Cultural Perspectives," *Journal of Thought* 19, no. 3 (1984):121–27.

D. M. Pavel and J. Reyhner, *Research Review: Addressing the Language and Culture Needs of Indigenous Communities* (Tempe, AZ: Center for Indian Education, Arizona State University, 2003).

J. Reyhner and D. Jacobs, "Preparing Teachers of American Indian and Alaska Native Students," *Action in Teacher Education* 24, no. 2 (2002):85–93.