

Teaching at the Maribor Summer School: Native North American Fiction: Story and Metastory

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For my class at the summer school in Maribor, I performed an experiment. I chose to avoid making a definitely fixed lecture plan and to proceed spontaneously in the format of a conversation with the students that would eventually lead us as a group to the creation of meaning. As theoretical physicist David Bohm argues (in his book *Thought as a System*, 1993), thought and knowledge are primarily collective phenomena, and through a group dialogue, which is free of authority (such as that of a teacher), it is possible to see how meaning flows, passing among the members of the group, allowing the students to verbalize the knowledge they already possess, but of which they are only half-aware, and to arrive at a new moment of creativity or, eventually, a new creative art form. I wanted to see if I could create this situation in a familiar conceptual environment, but I was a bit anxious.

I encouraged myself to do this because, in the first place, the topic of my class – the conception of story in Native American culture – has been my favourite subject for a considerable time. It is something I am really passionate about, so I wanted my students to see the passion; I wanted us to share the passion. Then, the topic itself allows for spontaneity because there is no storytelling without attending to the reception of the audience, and there one can never know exactly what will happen. I am sure that numerous times in our lives as teachers we have stepped into a classroom extensively prepared but for an exponential number of variables and alchemy that usually changes both students' lives and ours. When teaching international students, the need for creating space for learning to occur is slightly altered. We have to pay more attention to the expressions on the students' faces, to the tone and pacing of our remarks. Yet, the context of this summer school, which has gathered students from thirteen universities and of various degrees of competence in English, and who also come from a region that has been burdened with prejudices and conflicts, had, therefore, an additional demand on tailoring out our teaching methods. I knew that most of the students would have excellent English, but I did not know what time I would need to elicit feedback and make sure that they had absorbed the basic points of the new subject matter. However, this was a perfect context for probing the idea of storytelling as a primarily communal event.

Finally, when as a teacher of literature I am asked what I really want my students to achieve, what competences to acquire, or, as Kate Hoerbe-Montgomery asked at her lecture during the summer school, what would be the one word that would comprehend all our objectives as teacher, I always think of love. I wish my students to be able to transcend the context of, most generally speaking, local fears (including educational, political and cultural). I knew that, as students in the field of philology, they would be able to discuss the power of word, but I wanted them to open their hearts to the beautiful healing power of stories, open their minds to comprehend the arbitrariness of borders and the conception of acceptance, which is of the highest moral significance in Native American culture. The summer school in Maribor was certainly inspiring for pursuing such a topic.

Therefore, I proceeded without abstract terms. If students are supposed to focus their attention on creating new meanings, their first contact with the new task should be free from demanding theoretical concepts. Besides, it was the first class on Monday morning – meaning, they must have had trouble coming to school after a lively weekend at the Lent festival. It was obviously going to be necessary to make things interesting so that the students could immediately identify with what I was suggesting, that stories are understood to have empirical existence in Native American culture.

I started with a simple story about myself and went on teaching through telling stories about the Native American idea of seasons and their circular exchange; the symbolic meaning of the circle as completeness, good, health, and beauty; the Navajo healing prayer “The Beauty Way,” which understands the interconnection and responsibility of each phenomenon in the constantly revolving circle of Creation and in which words and stories are likewise powerfully creative and also destructive forces; storytellers, as N. Scott Momaday says, assume a great responsibility for what they create on the level of their human voice (cf. Momaday 23).

To illustrate this responsibility towards audience, community, and existence in general, we played a game. We had a task to imagine a strange creature. The choice of the subject was determined by its amusing and unusual nature, to make it easily memorable. We realized that this very act made our group a special community of individuals sharing the same knowledge. In the process of imagining those creatures, an important thing happened: we realized that we could hardly imagine an original creature, but that our creatures were always composed of things we had already encountered, especially in the movies. From this, we learned how our cultures influence our perception, thought, even our creative imagination, and that we cannot escape the cultural context to which we belong. When one of the students was asked to describe “her” creature, she said that it reminded of ET, only with elf ears. When I asked another student to draw the creature she was describing, the drawing did not match the imagined creature, yet the student could not have escaped drawing it the way he understood the description. When she mentioned “elf” ears, he understood “elephant ears,” which made the difference between their personal territories obvious. At this point, we problematized the concept of a personal territory as the context for a complex exchange of stories through which we perceive the world intentionally.

One of my favourite stories is the one about an arrowmaker, which I learned from Momaday. The story is short, so it can be told and retold in class several times, allowing for various interpretations. Its picturesqueness brings to life an old tribal world, life in the teepees, and the constant fear for existence that must have been experienced by a nomadic culture. The story goes like this:

If an arrow is well made, it will have tooth marks upon it. That is how you know. The Kiowas made fine arrows and straightened them in their teeth. Then they drew them to the bow to see if they were straight.

Once there was a man and his wife. They were alone at night in their tepee. By the light of a fire the man was making arrows. After a while he caught sight of something. There was a small opening in the tepee where two hides had been sewn together. Someone was there on the outside, looking in. The man went on with his work, but he said to his wife, “Someone is standing outside. Do not be afraid. Let us talk easily, as of ordinary things.” He took up an arrow and straightened it up in his teeth; then, as it was right for him to do, he drew it to the bow and took aim, first in this direction and then in that, while he was talking, as if to his wife. But this is how he spoke: “I know that you are there on the outside, for I can feel your eyes upon me. If you are a Kiowa, you will understand what I am saying, and you will speak your name.” But there was no answer and the man went on in the same way, pointing the arrow all around. At last his aim fell upon the place where his enemy stood, and he let go of the string. The arrow went straight to the enemy’s heart. (Momaday 9-10)

The length of the story enabled me to put emphasis on some parts by repeating them. Repetition, as is always the case in storytelling events, helps the audience to imagine the

situation being narrated, to memorize it easily, but also to re-imagine what they already knew and look for new meanings in what is being told. In this way we could problematize the interaction between tellers and listeners as determining agents creating meaning, but also being themselves determined as a specific microculture by the force of the story, using examples from some prevalent Native and general identity narratives with which students could strongly identify.

Finally I told a story about how I once met a Cherokee chief who told me a story about a white eagle. The story is very short, and it only says that this person was far away from home and that he got out of his car and saw a white eagle on a mountain. I wanted the students to divine into the meaning of the story and imagine their own end of the story. I gave them some time to do it and they came up with wonderful results. Some of their stories focused on the very act of narrating, some of them on symbolic potencies of the original image, such as the vast vision of the powerful bird and the nature it inhabits, some on the power of imagination, some on the very story as a communication means.

Yet, because our students' general knowledge is primarily informed by a culture that understands stories as artifacts, and not as life-affirming creative events, most of their stories had a bit of drama and a climax in them. Traditional Native American stories, on the contrary, are often flat, without any spectacular moments involved because story is conceived to repeat Creation, and because everything is good in Creation, as Thomas King explained, there is no need of changing it (Cf. King 1999). Once we remember that the Indian world is eco-centric (as opposed to the white ego-centric one, cf. Owens 1998), that there are no hierarchies in nature, and that, therefore, there is nowhere to fall from, we realize the socially constructed nature of sin and tragedy. Unlike the culture of the white settlers of the North American continent, which formed itself around the feeling of rejection and the concept of tragedy, the native culture, unexpectedly for the students, cherishes comedy and acceptance of life in all its controversy. To be healed, therefore, means to be able to happily accept all the differences of this world as it is, and, therefore, to be able to tell a good story!

By this we made the whole circle, realizing how perfectly interrelated and inextricable language, literature, and culture are! And we realized that a good story, if properly told, always ends in the same way, affirming life.

I must say that I was particularly satisfied with the class and with the summer school in general. It proved our claim of an urgent need to introduce interdisciplinary structured courses as a more palpable means of teaching our students how most efficiently to get to know the world they are to take an active part in.

Works Cited

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