

Oral Storytelling Techniques and Traditions: keys to memorization and preservation of cultural identity



ICW Cameron

The following is an excerpt from a longer piece. For the full text, please visit https://scholar.colorado.edu/concern/undergraduate_theses/1544br025 or scan the QR code.

Abstract

This paper explores the traditions of ancient cultures and the use of oral storytelling to preserve cultural identity and knowledge, as well as its contemporary applications in today's world. For the purpose of this thesis, Celtic, Greek, and Lakota oral traditions were selected and examined to help illuminate the useful techniques created by these long-surviving cultural peoples and how many are still being utilized today. Over the span of thousands of years, each technique tells a story of creativity, musical inspiration, and cultural resourcefulness to maintain unique attributes and wisdom for future generations to enjoy and learn from, along with a modern scientific understanding of what happens with the brain during an oral performance.

In the Beginning

The night's ceremonies have concluded, and most guests have had their fill of frybread and Buffalo stew. Most of the kids are more excited about the s'mores anyway, as the camping firepit is prepped and lit. The older kids and adolescents direct the younger children to grab skewers and marshmallows from the counter, then graham crackers from the cupboard, and finally, chocolate bars from the freezer. They run outside to find the elders sitting around the campfire, smiling as the stampede of youth comes rushing to cook their marshmallows. The fire crackles as the marshmallows are roasting, and a voice captures everyone's attention and begins to tell a tale that has survived generations.

Oral storytelling techniques play a crucial role in engaging the audience and facilitating memorization. Sensory engagement in oral storytelling is a powerful tool that connects the

audience to their heritage, creating a sense of continuity and belonging while also stimulating the imagination. It provides educators with a means of facilitating learning, with a higher possibility of content reaching long-term memory. Such notions necessitate understanding how the audience receives the information, how the human brain responds to certain stimuli, and how oral storytelling techniques provide scaffolding for committing what is learned to memory. The vocal cues, the human expressions during the live performance, the sights, sounds, and even the smells are not just details; they are at the heart of oral storytelling. These techniques help audiences absorb the story's message, memorize the content, and identify culturally significant themes, including characters, places, and events. The critical advantage of oral storytelling techniques comes from the engagement of multiple senses. The experience of a traditional live oral performance in the same medium as one's ancestors can be life-

changing. This thesis will prove that traditional oral storytelling techniques possess psychological and memorization attributes that are invaluable in preserving cultural heritage and knowledge as well as educating the next generations.

The study of storytelling and its oral nature spans many disciplines and traditions. When discussing traditional oral storytelling techniques, according to graphic novel theorist Will Eisner, who defines a storyteller as the “writer or person in control of the narration” (6), the definition would be in reference to a live person sharing information, musical inspiration, or a story with an audience. Theorist Walter Benjamin offers an explanation, “storytelling is a way to transfer knowledge from the storyteller to others, a way to help people look at reality and formulate ideas and ideals” (159). The storyteller often performs with the accompaniment of musical instruments and a unique backdrop, like a starry night or a painted stage, or in some contemporary setting, pyrotechnics and specialized lighting. These interactions, an elder telling a story or a bard reciting a poem, create a bonding effect within the tribe or nation, fostering

a sense of belonging and unity. Even those who cannot read can learn the same information as their counterparts, and the stories often engage the youth, who learn the cultural ways of their ancestors from a young age. When the source of the oration is known to be an accurate account of histories, family lineages, and news, it creates a level of trust within the group, tribe, or nation. In addition to this learning, many evolving oral storytelling transmission techniques, including morality-based stories for entertainment, carry these facts within the plotline.

[...]

Works Cited

- Eisner, Will. 1996. *Graphic Storytelling*. Poorhouse Press.
- Benjamin, Barbara “The Case Study: Storytelling in the Industrial Age and Beyond.” *On the Horizon*, vol. 14, no. 4, Oct. 2006, pp. 159–64. EBSCOhost, research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=bf081802-928c-3414-a952-df825296ofd5.