

Developing a Collaborative First Nations Storyteller-in-Residence Program

BC Library Conference May 11, 2012

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Presented at BC Library Conference May 11, 2012, with Amanda Nahanee, Vancouver Public Library's 2009 Storyteller-in-Residence.

This session focuses on literacy and expands it from reading to another very relevant way of sharing information and culture, highlighting the importance of storytelling in First Nations communities. Storytelling is an essential part of education and literacy for First Nations peoples.

In 2009, the Vancouver Public Library launched a three-year Storyteller in Residence program, funded by the Vancouver Foundation. The program sought to enhance understanding of Aboriginal culture and experience amongst Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal audiences through the sharing of First Nations stories, recognizing the significance that language and stories play in everyday life.

The program was designed by library staff using our Writer-in-Residence program as a model, but staff quickly realized that this model would not be appropriate for First Nations programs. This session describes how a traditional program, initially planned and developed by library staff, became a community-led program through collaboration directly with the Storytellers.

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Background

The Vancouver Public Library sought and received funding from the Vancouver Foundation for a First Nations Storyteller-in-Residence, to promote story as a way of sharing culture and building memory. The idea for this program grew out of our increasing awareness that the First Nations community, in general, was underserved by our Library. The Storyteller-in-Residence program would provide a valuable link between the Library and the First Nations community as a way to honour First Nations culture and to build trust. The Storyteller would act as a link between teller and listener, to promote literacy and a love of language; and between First Nations and non-First Nations people, to promote intercultural understanding and communication.

The Storyteller-in-Residence had three main responsibilities:

- To develop his or her own story material.
- To tell stories for the general public at the Central Library, branch libraries and other community locations.
- To mentor and help other individuals develop their own storytelling.

The overall goal of the program was to develop positive ongoing connections and relationships between the Library and local First Nations communities. With these relationships in place, future programming and services for First Nations communities could be planned and developed collaboratively, to ensure they would be relevant and meaningful. Funding had been secured based upon a standard program model previously used by the Library, that of the Canada Council Writer-in-Residence. The assumption was that the library could, with minor adjustments, simply substitute “storyteller” for “writer” when implementing the program.



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What the Library Learned: Three Themes

1. Develop trusting relationships over an ongoing, extended period.

We did not receive the same depth of information from community members the first few times we spoke with them, as we were able to after several months. It takes time to build trust. The First Nations community needed to know that we were not out to exploit or capitalize on their culture, or to engage them merely to appear politically correct.

Examples:

- **Ancestral language:** In the first few weeks of working with Jackie, he said the language of his village was now spoken very little, by just a few elders back home. About two months later, Jackie surprised us by speaking the language during one of his storytelling events. He hadn't suddenly just learned it – he was among those few who knew the language. Jackie hadn't felt comfortable letting us know this right away.
- **Acknowledge territory:** Amanda did explain the importance of acknowledging First Nations territory, but not until after we had been working with her for several months, and had already hosted several public events. Even though this acknowledgment of territory is a crucial element of First Nations protocol, Amanda didn't feel comfortable advising us about it until after several months. After all, we were the employer.



What the Library Learned: Three Themes, *continued*

2. Always Ask.

Assume you know nothing, even after you do have some experience. Sometimes, we had to hear the same concerns several times before we were able to really hear and understand their significance. Other times, the information we had learned applied to one situation but was not appropriate in a slightly different context.

Examples:

- ***“When do we need to offer an honorarium?”*** The Library had been presenting honoraria for elders who were invited to open the storytellers’ larger events, but this was arranged on a case by case basis with the storytellers, on their advice. We did not begin to get a broader, system-wide grasp of the process until after the end of our third storyteller’s residency, upon asking the storytellers for more guidance.
- ***“We need to film your stories for a DVD.”*** One of our deliverables to the funder was a DVD featuring the storytellers. This had been the Library’s own suggestion at the time of the proposal and seemed, to us, like the best way to document the experience and share more stories. However, Amanda hesitated and needed considerable consultation with her elders. Which stories would be appropriate for filming? How would the DVDs be used and by whom? Eventually, we began to understand more about the protocol and intellectual property concerns that apply to oral culture, and more importantly, the idea that a filmed story becomes fixed in time and is therefore, by definition, no longer a story.
- ***What names or words should we use when talking about aboriginal people and places?*** If non-aboriginal people use ancestral names instead of the anglicized versions, is that appreciated -- or is it pretentious and intrusive? We noticed that many First Nations people nearly always refer to themselves as Indians, but can non-aboriginal people use that term? We had these questions, among many others regarding names and terms. Jackie advised that there is no one-size-fits-all answer, but that in general most people identify first and mostly with their Nation, such as Musqueam, or even a specific village, such as Dead Man’s Creek, before they identify with more generic terms such as “aboriginal” or “indigenous.” And there could be additional heritages they wish to acknowledge in their family’s ancestral mix. In other words, we have to keep asking.



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What the Library Learned: Three Themes, *continued*

3. Keep listening and learning.

Although our steepest learning curve was in the earliest months of the program, we are still, several years later, increasing our understanding of aboriginal protocols.

Examples (all from April 2012):

- **Acknowledge territory, redux:** Anne attended a conference at which each indigenous speaker acknowledged territory, as his or her turn arose. Prior to observing this, we had assumed only the “opening” speaker made the acknowledgement.
- **Acknowledge people’s contributions:** Stephanie attended a First Nations language and art event, at which the opening speaker named every person who had made an effort to support the venture. Some were acknowledged simply for making a special trip in order to attend. This resulted in a longish introduction, but was treated as natural and important -- not as a checklist of preliminaries to “get through.” Such acknowledgment may serve equally well at non-aboriginal events, but seemed particularly expected and important there. Incidentally, this opening speaker was non-aboriginal.
- **Public speaking credibility:** We learned from Henry that speaking directly to an audience or group of people, without notes, is far more respectable among the Musqueam people than looking at notes (or worse, *reading from* notes). It is fine to refer to notes for a specific purpose, for example to quote somebody and ensure the quote is accurate. Henry’s approach is to produce notes only when required, even explain why he needs them; then to put them completely away before continuing.



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Small Steps, Significant Results...

...in making a standard program more community-led

Existing Program Model	Changed to ...
Candidates selected by written submissions of previously published work, critical reviews	Candidates selected by personal interviews including storytelling presentation, plus criteria learned from First Nations elders and advisors
Personal project proposal required as part of candidate's application package	Personal project to be determined during residency, as community interest was assessed and relationships developed
Personal project was one or more pieces of writing	Personal project could include history, drama, drumming, carving, or other art forms
Stories are verbal pieces with a beginning, middle, end	Stories are vehicle for connecting and teaching; may include less structured accounts; cannot readily be separated from singing, drumming, carving, weaving, history and other arts or technology
Public programming schedule and locations set by Library	Some programming set by Library, but most community programming developed by Storytellers, based on their own connections
Mentorships established and scheduled by email requests from members of public	Mentorship conducted one-to-one with family members, or other individuals chosen by Storyteller as "ready to learn"
Adult programming and events	Multi-generational programming and events
Mostly in-library programming	Programs in numerous alternate locations not typically served by library programs
Job description and posting created and approved by Library staff	Job description and posting considerably edited by aboriginal elders and advisors
Recruiting via Library website, established academic writing programs, ads in literary periodicals	Recruiting via Library website, personal contacts in aboriginal community, ads in aboriginal newspaper, emails directly to band offices, word of mouth



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Small Steps, Significant Results...

...in making a standard program more community-led, continued

Existing Program Model	Changed to ...
Success determined by increased circulation of relevant materials	Relevant materials rarely exist in physical form or as "circulating material." This criteria was entirely abandoned.
Success determined by number of participants attending programs, and by feedback forms filled out by audience members	Success determined by whether ongoing meaningful relationships were established between Library and First Nations community, via personal interviews, other observations
People filled out comment cards at programs	People continuously said, wrote or did things indicating the impact and opportunity offered by the program
Connections made with library patrons	In addition to library patrons, connections made with aboriginal organizations and individuals which the Library would otherwise be unlikely to access
Self-contained successful program	Advice sought and implemented from Storytellers on a variety of Library policies, procedures and services to maximize their relevance to aboriginal community



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Selected Learning Opportunities

Please note: by creating this comparative list, we are not suggesting that there is one set of “library” viewpoints and one set of “aboriginal” viewpoints. The chart is simply a convenient format to show topics where both Library and Storyteller (but mainly the Library) were able to learn more about working together in a meaningful way.

Made sense / important to Library	Makes sense / important to Storyteller
Acknowledge the foundation / funder of the program at public events	Acknowledge the First Nation’s territory in which events take place
Increase circulation of materials, registration of new patrons, or other readily countable measures	Bring people together, share knowledge, feel connected
Afraid we won’t know how to work with the aboriginal community effectively	Afraid we are hiring a “token native,” that Library is just trying to be politically correct
Budget applies to “library” resources only (staff, books, etc)	Offering food and drinks at events is expected
Keep costs low	Include opening prayers by elder -- honoraria required
Experts with degrees, certificates, research	Elders with knowledge, memory, wisdom
Hire staff with appropriate degrees or certificates	See themselves reflected among library staff
No volunteers in unionized environment	Include family and friends as helpers, mentors
Concerns about copyright, plagiarism	Concerns about permission, cultural property
Payment according to existing invoicing / cheque signing schedule of organization	Payment as soon as possible after services rendered



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Selected Learning Opportunities, *continued*

Made sense / important to Library	Makes sense / important to Storyteller
Hire a storyteller with considerable experience with media, large groups, report writing	Hire a storyteller with cultural legitimacy, respected in the community
Fire and safety regulations	Smudge/smoke
Study spaces	Drums
Public programs as opportunity to promote other library programs, distribute brochures	Programs as opportunity to raise awareness of aboriginal experience
Follow proper process and protocols – but what are they?	Follow proper process and protocols – but what are they?



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