

Readers' Theatre as Cancer Education: An Organic Inquiry in Alaska Awakening Possibilities in a Living Spiral of Understanding

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Abstract Organic inquiry, as the qualitative research design method, provided for a richness of data to more fully appreciate how 24 diverse adult learners in Alaska described their experience with Readers' Theatre as cancer education both during a workshop and over time that allowed for reflection and contemplation. Readers' Theatre, as a pathway for cancer education, nurtured healing, renewal, affirmation, and shifts in knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs, which empowered action. Readers' Theatre created a respectful environment for adult learners from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds in Alaska to engage in meaningful conversations that awakened possibilities in a living spiral of understanding.

Keywords Adult education · Readers' Theatre · Cancer education · Organic inquiry · Alaska Native · Storytelling

We don't talk about it (cancer)—the Big C—that's how we walked around our family—oh she's got the Big C. But you know we whispered it and stuff. ~Participant

Cancer among Alaska Native peoples is often not talked about, keeping a shroud of silence intact, reinforcing the ways in which health disparities remain invisible. Cancer

rates for Alaska Native peoples are among the highest in any ethnic group in the USA and are increasing [1]. The number of new Alaska Native peoples diagnosed with cancer each year increased nearly fourfold over a 35-year period (1969–2003). Cancer death rates for Alaska Native peoples during 1998–2002 were 30% higher than rates in the US Caucasian population, while survival rates were 17% lower than US Caucasians [1]. There is a need to speak out if all the health disparities are to become extinct... if we are to become whole as people.

Could Readers' Theatre serve as a culturally respectful way to bridge the often difficult conversation of cancer? Might Readers' Theatre as scripted stories, serve as a springboard for cross-cultural dialog, freeing imagination for the hopeful discovery of possibilities? Organic inquiry, as the qualitative research design method, provided for a richness of data to more fully appreciate how 24 diverse adult learners in Alaska described their experience with Readers' Theatre both during a workshop and over time that allowed for reflection and contemplation. *Understanding* the 45-min cancer education, Readers' Theatre script used in this study grew out of Alaskans' experiences and concerns related to cancer.

What is Readers' Theatre?

Readers' Theatre is the coming together of two or more people to engage in the reading aloud and simultaneous listening of a conversation that has been scripted. Participants are invited to read any part they prefer; men may read women's roles or a woman may read a man's character. Participants may read the words of an elder or a youth. By choosing to read a character that differs from a person's gender or age they may gain different insight. Once roles are chosen, participants read the script aloud. Listener participants

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are also given the script to follow along or to listen without reading as their imagination creates meaning. Readers are arranged among the listeners to create a conversational, inclusive experience. Readers' Theatre using this approach is not a performance-based experience, but a catalyst for critical reflection and social construction of understanding. The role of reader and listener as active participants and contributors is an essential part of the shared development of new understanding. Readers are not viewed as performers isolated in power or authority from those participating as listeners. Each role demands giving of oneself in a shared experience. Learning through theater is in line with constructivist theory, which holds that each person brings her or his past to new encounters and builds upon them [2].

Alaska Native peoples have a rich storytelling tradition grounded in a dynamic, experientially based, oral culture. Warner contrasted western and Indigenous cultural understandings describing how the written word is "...dead and dry, interrupting the process of listening, seeing and understanding with the heart. Speech, however, is alive and moist, carried outward on the breath" [3]. Angayuq Oscar Kawagley described his Yup'ik oral orientation, "Hearing stories being told allowed the hearers to savor the words and visualize the events, becoming part of the story. The modern written word is useful for many things but it removes the reader from the human interaction element" [4]. Readers' Theatre as story embraces the oral tradition as a viable means of knowing, indigenous to many cultures. As stated on the Alaska Native Heritage Center website,

The tradition of storytelling is part of all Alaska Native cultures. Stories have been used since ancient times to tell our family histories and life lessons, describe role models, impart mythology, and entertain [5].

Building upon Alaska Native peoples' cultural values, Readers' Theatre is based in the oral tradition, validates the use of story as a way of teaching, and supports interconnected, social learning.

Research Design

Methodology

Culturally respectful ways of inquiry were paramount to this study. Linda Tuhiwai Smith in her book *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* highlighted numerous examples of how research has marginalized the heritage and beliefs of Indigenous peoples [6]. Through the use of organic inquiry [7] this study endeavored to bridge the limitations of traditional research methodologies as articulated by Cajete, "Objectivist research has contributed a dimension of insight, but it has

substantial limitations in the multidimensional, holistic, and relational reality of Indigenous people" [8].

Organic Inquiry took root in 1994 growing out of transpersonal psychology, feminist theory, and spirituality [7]. Learning is viewed as a dynamic, interconnected journey that requires being attentive to spiritual, visceral, affective, cognitive, and physical elements. The five guiding principles of Organic Inquiry respect diverse ways of knowing and being: the sacred, the personal, the chthonic, the relational, and the transformative. Curry and Wells added a sixth principle, numinous, as the balance to the chthonic, which was not included in the original organic inquiry model [9]. *Sacred* acknowledges the interconnectedness of living and learning. When we engage in authentic dialog, we enter a sacred place where care and reverence are essential. As an adult educator, I am entrusted with people's stories, words, and experiences, which lay bare vulnerabilities. The *personal* was shared in the naming of who I am and who I am becoming as a researcher, respectfully sharing this journey to learn with and from participants. During the past 25 years, I have worked with and for Alaska Native peoples and American Indian peoples as a nurse and health educator. *Chthonic* is described in organic inquiry as the place of unrest where we grapple with fears, insecurities, and doubts. Challenged by the discomfort of the chthonic we are invited to grow and learn in new ways. The principle of the *numinous* balances the chthonic as a guiding source of inspiration or way of direct knowing, often revealed in 'ah-ha' moments of understanding. The *relational* invites interconnected ways of knowing and supports an equality in power, manifest as research 'with'. The *transformative* invites growth or change, subtle or dramatic in the researcher's, participants', and you, the readers', understanding or behavior. Change may be individual or part of a collective experience with action being manifest internally and/or externally. Through the principles of organic inquiry, one is invited to experience the world more consciously aware which enriches life's journey and creates a more wholistic inquiry.

Modes of Data Collection and Participant Demographics

Understanding, as experienced through the visceral, affective, cognitive, and spiritual domains, emerged from two Readers' Theatre workshops with a post-reading written reflection and discussion, a follow-up interview conversation 2-3 months later along with journaling and field notes.

There were 24 participants: 22 women and two men. Ethnicity varied; 12 people were Alaska Native including Athabaskan, Tlingit, Inupiat, Yup'ik, and Aleut, one person was Chippewa, one person was Asian, one person was Hispanic, and 10 people were Caucasian. The age range was 25-63 years, with 45 years being the average.

To allow for reflection, contemplation, and shifts in the thoughts, feelings, or actions of participants, a semi-structured interview conversation ranging from 30 min to 2.5 h was conducted 2–3 months after the workshops: 14 by telephone, due to Alaska's vastness, and nine in person. One participant was unable to be reached for an interview.

Throughout this study, participants were invited to comment about how I shared their words and shaped the presentation of findings. I sought participant guidance to affirm that I was respectful in honoring the sacredness of all that I was entrusted with to wholistically communicate with future readers.

Findings and Conclusions

Readers' Theatre as a learning modality for adult education nurtured healing, renewal, affirmation, and shifts in knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs, which empowered action.

Both readers and listeners described being actively engaged in their learning journey through the process of Readers' Theatre.

I was a listener, so for me it was an opportunity to just be present for each other... doesn't happen much in a person's day. As a listener, Readers' Theatre allowed an opportunity to be introspective... created an opportunity for critical reflection.

In the words of a participant who read a character role aloud:

I think it is a great tool because the spoken word allows you to verbalize and I think we get things by speaking them. I value spoken word and that process. Strong oral story traditions resonate with our community, the community I grew up in and that's very typical of Alaska communities, but that is also cross cultural.

Readers' Theatre created an openness which invited diverse perspectives to enter into the conversation. The script provided a way for culturally diverse participants to discuss difficult topics at a distance through the lives of the characters or if they so chose to relate their personal experiences. The characters became the conduit for participants to speak freely in direct or indirect ways. The locus of control was with each participant. In the words of a participant:

It helps open a place for discussion to have difficult conversations, maybe to talk about things we don't talk about. After this. I went home and was talking about this workshop. It is not talked about. Nobody talks about my Aunt's cancer and we don't talk about

my Uncle's death. Nobody talks about it and I think you should. It is really important. It can help us begin to heal. All you can do is talk about it and I think that was one way it affected me personally was to be able to go home and talk about cancer with my family and community.

By giving voice through scripted conversations, topics often difficult to discuss are brought front and center, no longer destined to remain at the fringe of our subconscious or haunting the depths of our conscious unable to filter into accepted conversations. Readers' Theatre created a place for participants to courageously enter the challenging conversation of cancer. As a participant reminded us, "*There are always difficult conversations and this to me is like the ultimate ice breaker.*" The script also provided words for participants to begin to talk:

For me the Readers' Theatre has helped out a lot, just reading the words of Margie (a character in the play). I can tell people now that I have had breast cancer and I don't cry. Reading that part made me realize that cancer is not something you should deal with on your own, but it is something that you should share and get out, instead of holding it in and that was the biggest difference for me.

Readers' Theatre entered the silence of cancer, reflecting hope. Hope grounded in knowledge as a catalyst for fresh beginnings.

Pathways for Practice

Seven themes emerged (story, feelings, laughter, communication, power, learning, and transformation) which give insight into how adult learners created meaning as either readers or listeners through a cancer education Readers' Theatre experience. The following examples of each of the seven themes articulate insight for adult education practitioners and illustrate pathways for practice.

Story

Stories are really important to help you to learn. Stories help us to hear different ways of experience and perspectives. Stories give you a backdrop that you can relate to.

I really respect stories. It is still an active part of our culture. Stories are handed down just by oral, just by telling your family, that's how it is preserved.

The importance of story respects the oral traditions of Alaska Native peoples and bridged cultures as participants listened to each other's stories and shared their experiences. Stories embraced people's hearts, minds, and spirits connecting men, women, and participants from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds. The Readers' Theatre served as the "*launching pad*" or "*ice breaker*" for what participants described as the real stories, their stories. Learning became relevant and meaningful. Stories engendered pathways for creating connections, enhancing understanding, exploring possibilities, and envisioning the future.

Not only was story described as being important to the learning experience but some participants embodied the experience, becoming part of the story.

It really kept me engaged. You were part of a really good story and you wanted to hear how it was going to turn out, what was going to happen next...

Story is accessible to each of us. We are each born into a story, giving guidance to who we are and where we came from. We each live, learn, and grow surrounded by stories. Story is available as a way to share perspectives and connect diverse peoples in a learning environment to build community.

Consider: How might you weave story into your adult education practice or life work?

Feelings

I saw or sensed much more internalizations of the messages because it touches people's feelings. It bypasses the whole cognitive rational mindset and goes straight to people's hearts where our wisdom really lies.

There are many ways that Readers' Theatre seems to tap into our level of knowing that we don't often talk about. Touches some sort of tap root inside us and you can see that when it touches that place it nourishes something inside us because you will see people flower right away in the post reading discussion, they blossom right in front of your eyes. Like places that haven't received water in awhile.

Emotional... I think is very important because when we actually feel it when we are emotionally invested we are more apt to follow through with change, if there is something we can do we are more apt to follow through and do that. Having the emotional involvement is definitely an important part of learning.

Feelings and emotions emerged through the process of Readers' Theatre. Every participant described an element of

emotion coupled with a memory. Readers' Theatre connected with participants affectively to discover deeper understanding. Emotions, such as fear and anxiety, were also described as barriers to learning. The act of talking about and naming emotions took away their power, allowing participants to experience a shift in knowledge and understanding. Behavior change emerged as a result of affective engagement which moved beyond merely a cognitive understanding. Learning, that inspired action, emanated from the heart.

Consider: How might you engage adult learners affectively as well as cognitively to facilitate learning and increase memory retention? Are there unnamed feelings hindering learning and understanding?

Laughter

The script is fantastic because it interjects humor throughout, and I keep trying to let folks know that when us Native people are by ourselves we are laughing our heads off all day long.

If you don't have fun while you are learning then everything you are learning is just not going to stick.

Laughter, which bubbled up during both Readers' Theatre workshops, supports the value of humor. Life and learning are full of moments, which burst with emotional energy, erupting as laughter. Laughter was experienced as a natural response to conversation and not through scripted jokes or intentional behavior. Humor was expressed in chuckles and belly laughs as people came together and shared in a moment of light-heartedness. Laughter was described as a source of nourishment, strength, and healing that supported learning and enhanced memory retention. Spontaneous moments of laughter celebrated our humanness, energized the learning environment, and brought diverse learners together in a shared experience.

Consider: How might you be more receptive to nurturing respectful laughter to support learning?

Communication

I think Readers' Theatre makes it easier to talk about more difficult conversations. We didn't talk about cancer in the village. I think it can foster discussion—allow us to hear different perspectives—helps other people to share.

I think it can help to communicate. A learning tool... to learn how to listen to patients, or give words to communicate with people.

The theme of communication reverberated as participants shared how Readers' Theatre invited a deeper level of conversation. Additionally, participants appreciated the opportunity to really listen. Readers' Theatre honors the oral tradition which invites people to be fully present as active listeners, immersed in an unfolding story. Adult education includes pathways for bringing people together to create a place for genuine communication of diverse ideas and perspectives, enriched through respectful active listening and reflective talking, both roles embraced through Readers' Theatre.

Consider: How might you encourage learners to practice more moments of active listening and reflective talking?

Power

There are always difficult conversations and this to me is like the ultimate ice breaker. It makes everyone feel the same, on the same level; everyone can enter the conversation equally.

Readers' Theatre served as a respectful way to balance power between myself as the facilitator and participants, as well as among the participants. Although the word "power" was never used during interview conversations it was clearly described as participants shared their experience: *"Everyone was invited," "talked with and not at,"* and *"participant centered vs. teacher centered."* *"The Readers' Theatre allowed the learner to not only be a participant but a teacher because we were allowed to share our experiences ... tap into our own stories."* Participants shared the importance of Readers' Theatre as an equalizer, bringing balance, nurturing an environment of respect where everyone was invited to share as teacher and simultaneous learner.

Consider: How might you share power with and among learners? How does controlling the power in a learning environment work for you or against you?

Learning

Hearing all those different perspectives is a good reminder of the uniqueness of each person's story.

From an English perspective cancer has a new language, with a Readers' Theatre script you can see it, you can hear it being pronounced and it introduces new language.

It allowed you to get in touch with your feelings. If you have someone with a blackboard or a power point you don't have to invest in it at all.

Learning, as described by each participant, was unique to her or his experience. However, participants described a wholistic embodied learning experience, which incorporated the sacred or spiritual, the visceral, the cognitive, and the affective. Multiple senses were drawn into the learning experience, which may account for the clarity of detail in which participants described their experience 2-3 months after the workshop and in some cases a year later. As confirmed by one participant, *"Well I was really impressed with the workshop because of how much stuck with me."*

Consider: How might you engage learners as biopsychosocial beings? What elements are missing in your adult education practice or from your life work that could enrich a fuller understanding?

Transformation

For me I think of Readers' Theatre as the color yellow... why? It was bright, it brought more light to my eyes, and it taught me a lot and I think a lot of it stuck with me, I guess that's why I'm really stuck on this thing of teaching our people.

Catharsis to me means... it's a healing process, it's a renewal... like when I go to the ocean, the ocean is very cathartic to me... it's healing, it's rejuvenating, its bringing... it gives me hope... it rejuvenates me and it's also healing. I think hearing other people opening up and speaking about their experiences is cathartic, it is healing, and I think it helps you to heal, helps the wounds to close. That's what I kind of feel about it.

Transformation resonated as an affirmation of renewal... as a settling expressed with a deep *"ahh."* Participants described subtle shifts in meaning perspectives from which new insight emerged and *"ah-ha"* moments were born. As adult educators and learners, our paths weave together creating a richer, more diverse experience. Readers' Theatre as engagement connected with participants affirming who they are and inviting them to think or feel or act in ways that supported their learning journey. The image of a loop

or spiral or circle was often drawn in the air or voiced as participants described their shifts in meaning.

Consider: How might you nurture growth through transformative moments of clarity or renewal?

Expanding the Spiral

The process of facilitating learning is not static, but a dynamic process of collaboration. It is important to develop educational processes that respectfully honor diverse and interconnected ways of knowing. “As long as we continue to appreciate various knowledges and reflect on our teaching and learning strategies, there is hope that we can provide appropriate, inclusive environments for all learners” [10].

To collaboratively expand the world of possibility is at the heart of adult education. It is important to facilitate learning environments, which foster creativity and nurture one’s potential in new dimensions. Knowledge is often not enough to elicit personal growth through shifts in attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors, however, the stories shared through Readers’ Theatre brought diverse adult learners together in a community where people laughed, cried, expressed, and discussed meaningful topics. Participants left renewed or pondering possibilities.

As cancer educators, it is important to embrace learning pathways that support the potential of diverse adult learners to move beyond existing understandings to discover and explore other perspectives and knowledge claims. Readers’

Theatre as cancer education nurtured a respectful environment for adult learners from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds in Alaska to engage in meaningful conversations that awakened possibilities in a living spiral of understanding.

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