Chapter 5

Story Rug

Weaving Stories into Research

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During my dissertation journey, I began to see research as a weaving process. I am neither an expert nor an avid rug weaver; only at this point in time an interested, curious learner. Growing up on the Navajo reservation, much of my knowledge of rug weaving has been from formal schooling, observing Navajo weavers, listening to stories from family, and from embarking on my own novice attempts at weaving. In this chapter, I explain how the formation of what I term story rug evolved. I begin with sharing the powerful effect Indigenous methodology and stories had on me as a Navajo woman, which ultimately helped me to find the courage to begin weaving my story rug. I then briefly explain my research with Navajo first-year college students’ stories as they journeyed into college. I provide a condensed overview of the research to help contextualize the story rug development. Using story rug as an Indigenous methodological structure, I next describe and elaborate on my progression in weaving the story rug throughout the dissertation. I conclude with final thoughts on how story rug and Indigenous metaphorical frameworks can deepen methodological approaches in research.

Indigenous Methodology, Stories, and My Awakening

As Manulani Aluli Meyer asserts, “We must develop new theories from ancient agency so we can accurately respond to what is right before our very eyes” (2008, p. 217), meaning that Indigenous methodology has been a part of our life since time immemorial to help us answer many of the questions of today. Indigenous peoples have skillfully passed on methodology through storytelling. Storytelling and stories within Native societies encompass symbolism and philosophical formations (Cook-Lynn, 2008) that remain profoundly critical to understanding...
and navigating through the multifaceted dimensions of life (Archibald, 2008; Denetdale, 2014; Kovach, 2009; Smith, 1999; Wilson, 2008).

Cajete (1994) asserts that experiential stories are essential for learning and in forming positive transformation for Indigenous communities. Stories provide a space to learn from and unite with others, as listening to or reading a story privileges us to be connected to or belong to that story world. Story and knowing, or method and meaning, is an inseparable relationship such that “stories are vessels for passing along teachings, medicines, and practices that can assist members of the collective” (Kovach, 2009, p. 95). And a collective, “we” concept is what centers Indigenous methodology as stories are often conveyed with someone or with others for the betterment of those listening (Meyer, 2001; Archibald, 2008). For Native peoples, stories are a legitimate tool for relating with others, sharing knowledge across generations, analyzing life circumstances, and seeking solutions for the future.

During the dissertation journey, I immersed myself in Indigenous methodological scholarship as a way to grasp what it means to utilize Indigenous methods in research. But as I read, I struggled with how to make the connection between Navajo teachings and research. Allow me to explain what awakened within me to understand that intricate relationship. I recall feeling a sense of relief and excitement when I submitted a draft of my findings chapter to my dissertation advisor. I felt confident that the chapter was well written, and I naively believed that I would only need to make a few edits. Days later, I received a thoughtful and critical email from my advisor in which she encouraged me that I could do a better job and suggested that I dig deeper in my analysis. I was crushed. My confidence plummeted. In my mind I was thinking, “I can’t do better. This is the best I could do. Maybe the doctoral degree is not for me? Maybe writing is indeed my weakness?” Insecurities resurfaced as I questioned my ability to dig deeper and complete the dissertation.

I took a few days to gather myself. Then, early one morning, I prayed and sought guidance from the Creator about how to dig deeper in research. While praying, I heard a quiet voice that delicately told me, “Write like you are weaving a rug.” At that moment, I recognized that weaving a rug was like weaving stories. Meyer eloquently states, “The spirituality of knowledge . . . [is] the light of fundamental empirical knowing” (2008, p. 218). I understood what Meyer meant in acknowledging that spirit and knowing are intricately connected just as story and knowing are linked together. Immediately, I started writing. I surrendered my ego and wrote from the light of fundamental empirical knowing. And in that writing process, the story rug emerged.
Before I share the components of the story rug framework, I provide a brief overview of Indigenous Storywork (Archibald, 2008) and narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008), which were the interpretative strategies that guided my process. To be clear, my dissertation research focused on ten Navajo college freshmen students’ experiential stories as they navigated into college. By placing Navajo students’ stories at the center of analysis, I de-centered the dominant discourse that too often generalizes Native student experiences and individualizes Natives as deficits.

In gathering stories this way, I employed a combination of qualitative methodologies. Indigenous Storywork (Archibald, 2008) and Narrative Inquiry (Riessman, 2008) both feature stories as an influential mode of inquiry. Indigenous Storywork was developed by Jo-Ann Archibald (from the Sto:lo Nation) in her work with Sto:lo and Coast Salish elders and storytellers as a way to bridge Indigenous storytelling into formal educational contexts. Seven theoretical principles guide Indigenous Storywork, including adhering to respect, responsibility, reciprocity, reverence, holism, interrelatedness, and synergy. Overall Indigenous Storywork acknowledges and claims Indigenous ways of knowing into research.

Narrative analysis complements Indigenous ways of knowing such that narrative analysis acknowledges that “Individuals must now construct who they are and how they want to be known” (Riessman, 2008, p. 7). Reclaiming the research space by asserting “who they are and how they want to be known” is a promising step toward decolonizing methodologies (Smith, 1999). Narrative analysis provides a space where people can make sense of the past, engage others in the experiences of the storyteller, and mobilize others into action for progressive change. A distinction of narrative analysis from other forms of qualitative methodology is that, “narrative study relies on extended accounts that are preserved and treated analytically as units, rather than fragmented into thematic categories as is customary in other forms of qualitative analysis” (Riessman, 2008, p. 12). Therefore, individual stories are honored in the gathering stage and throughout the analytical process. However, narrative analysis also acknowledges that individual stories can be moved to generalize theoretical propositions, proposing that the gathering of individual stories creates a powerful unified voice.

**Story Rug as an Indigenous Research Framework**

Metaphors were integral to this research, as metaphors evoke imagination and ancient wisdom. I found the use of metaphors a natural part of my thinking and writing as metaphors provided a space to visualize and connect difficult thought processes and assert the Navajo way of life. I continued to envision
writing like weaving. In Indigenous Storywork, Archibald utilized a metaphorical basket to conceptualize research, and I visualized a Navajo rug—I visualized a story rug.

As I worked to create the story rug, I became more attuned to the knowledge and experiences that go into weaving a Navajo rug. On my trips home to the Navajo Reservation, my family and I would often visit with the Malone family. Bill Malone was a former trader at the historic Hubbell Trading Post located in my hometown of Ganado (Berkowitz, 2011). They now own their own store in Gallup, New Mexico, located on the outskirts of the Navajo Reservation. Since I was a youth, Bill and his wife, Minnie, and their children have been a part of our family’s life. Minnie is a remarkable rug weaver. During a recent visit, I was immediately taken with the stunning Navajo rugs that hung from the walls and that were displayed over tables. I heard the gentle thumping sound of a weaving comb. Minnie was diligently working on a rug. I sat near Minnie and observed her hands patiently and meticulously pull charcoal colored wool through the warp. She shared with me stories about weaving, love, and relationships. In listening to her, I began to formulate clearer insights that connected weaving a rug to weaving a dissertation.

Figure 5.1. Eye Dazzler rug woven by my husband’s maternal grandmother, Marie Tacheeney
The story rug I wove in my dissertation work has six parts that coincide with components of Navajo weaving. I will briefly explain each part here and then go into more detail throughout this chapter. In chapter 1 of the dissertation, I built the loom (Introduction): I provided a preview into the foundational features of the overall story rug including the purpose, research questions, methods, and significance. In chapter 2, I warped the loom (Literature Review): I presented the literature that shaped my understanding. I provided an overview of Native and Navajo educational attainment and the theoretical frameworks employed. In chapter 3, I gathered the weaving tools (Methodology): I described the methodological design including the interpretative strategies of Indigenous Storywork and narrative analysis, collection of stories, and the analytical process. In chapters 4 and 5 I wove the story rug (Findings). Throughout both chapters, I shared individual and collective stories of the ten Navajo students who participated in the study. Moreover, in chapter 4 I presented the Twin Warriors Story, a Navajo traditional oral story, and discussed how the Twin Warrior story applied to the students’ journeys toward college. In chapter 6, I cared for the story rug (Conclusion): I offered implications for practice and recommendations for the future care of the story rug.

In the next sections, I will describe the connection between traditional forms of dissertation chapters (e.g., introduction, literature review, methodology, findings, and conclusions) and the rug weaving process (e.g., building the loom, warping the loom, gathering of story rug tools, weaving stories, and caring for the story rug), which provides a story rug framework for research.

**Building the Loom: Introduction**

To begin I built the story rug loom. A loom is the frame that holds the rug as it is woven. The loom is constructed using foundational features such as being solidly built with heavy construction materials like wood and metal, allowing the weaver easy access to the loom and positioning it accurately for weaving to occur (Bennett & Bighorse, 1971). In essence, the loom is well constructed in order to withstand the tugs of the weaving process.

In a dissertation, the introduction sets the basis of the overall research. Therefore, I viewed the introduction similarly to building a loom. In this story rug, the loom needed to be well constructed by positioning foundational features. Therefore, in building the story rug loom I included introduction elements such as an articulation of the purpose of the research where I elaborated on the centrality of Native students’ experiences. I also articulated the research questions, an overview of the methodology, the significance of the study, and organization of the study as it relates to weaving a rug.
Warping the Loom: Literature Review

Before any creation of weaving begins, the warp needs to be put into place. The warp is thin, tightly spun yarn that is strung up and down in a vertical position throughout the loom. Basically, it is what secures all the strands (weft) together. Setting the warp can be a difficult task, as it needs to be strung tightly to withstand the tension of the weaving process. I see the warp as the binding groundwork upon which the weaver builds. In my research, setting the warp was similar to laying down prior knowledge that eventually helped to shape the story rug.

The purpose of chapter 2 (generally known as the literature review) acknowledges the literature that assisted in explaining how Native students navigate through educational systems and negotiate through challenges that they may experience. I presented an overview of Native educational attainment and the theoretical frameworks, Tribal Critical Race Theory (Brayboy, 2005), Cultural Resilience (HeavyRunner & Marshall, 2003), and Cultural Threads (Tachine, 2015), that guided my research approach.

Warping yarn on a loom can be a strenuous task, as you have to ensure that the warp is wrapped suitably. This process is very similar to crafting a literature review, because pulling together various research pieces into a concise, organized layout can be labor-intensive and tedious. Yet, the process is crucial for creating a well-woven rug.

Gathering of Story Rug Tools: Methods

In preparing to begin the weaving process the weaver gathers tools, which are the key instruments to creating a rug. The tools include the battens which are used to separate the warp sets for easier access; a weaving fork or comb that is used for pounding the weft (horizontal yarn) into position; sacking needles to help with the weaving near the ending stage; and yarn used to create the overall tapestry (Bennett & Bighorse, 1971). Often a mother or grandmother gives these tools to a weaver, as several weavers believe that, “To lend a tool to someone is to give your power... a gift of energy and ideas as well” (p. 10).

I believe that we are given ideas and gifts from scholars and students to help us create a story rug. Chapter 3 served as the process of gathering the story rug tools (methodology) where I described the tools that helped to shape the story rug. The gathering of story rug tools chapter included the interpretative strategies of Indigenous Storywork and narrative analysis, collection of student stories, and my positionality in weaving the students’ stories.

Weaving in Students’ and Traditional Oral Stories: Findings

Weaving a Navajo rug is a strenuous process for both body and mind. As a beginner in rug weaving, my body is often sore after a day of weaving because it takes much discipline and strength to sit in front of a loom and patiently thread wool.
in and out of the warp. I not only try to maintain a sense of balance with my body, I am also concentrating on the delicate process of ensuring each single thread is woven just right to create an overall design. In that process, many thoughts dance in my mind as I recognize that my being is connected to the loom and those around me. Maintaining a sense of direction and diligence with the mind is important to the rug weaving process.

Similarly, sifting through student interviews and creating an overall story rug requires much toil for the body and mind. By using a story rug framework, I was able to process through the findings section and maintain the individuality of each of the student stories as well as gather students’ experience into collective “designs.” And in this example the designs created the themes the students shared in common. I saw the individual story as a single strand in the story rug. I then saw the gathering of student stories as a way to prominently display the designs in the story rug.

In weaving students’ stories (findings chapters) I included three sets of stories as a way to capture their individual journeys. The first set is titled the “Student Introduction Stories” where I provide a brief biographical account of the ten students, including where they and their families are from. In the second set of stories, “Students’ Schooling Stories,” I share the students’ schooling experiences, including how they saw themselves as a student, type of schools they attended, and their involvement within their schools. I then included the “Students’ College Entrance Stories,” as the last sets of stories. Those stories comprised a recollection of when students first thought about college, how many colleges they applied to, and what fields they were interested in studying. These sets of individual stories were threaded throughout the dissertation as a way to maintain the integrity of their experiences. To illustrate an example of the individual story threads, I included a sample of Sarah’s story.

Sarah’s Story. As I mentioned earlier, I introduced the ten Navajo students by providing a brief biographical account of who they are, where they are from, and their families. This introduction is the customary way for Navajo people to introduce themselves. However, to protect the anonymity of the student, I did not disclose Navajo clans as would be expected from a Navajo perspective. Respectfully, names and towns located on the Navajo Reservation are pseudonyms.

Sarah had long hair that was usually coiled in a tight bun. She often wore blue jeans, a college t-shirt with a Nike zip-up sweatshirt, and worn running shoes. Her black-framed glasses sat comfortably on her smiley face as she had one of those faces that naturally formed into a warm smile. Sarah was born and raised on the Navajo Nation Reservation, in a small rural town called Purple Hills with roughly 1,200 residents. There were three gas stations, a tiny post office,
a small hospital/clinic, a school campus, and a handful of state/tribal offices sprinkled throughout the town. Modest homes, mobile trailers, and hogans (Navajo traditional dwellings) were spread throughout Purple Hills. Sarah loved to roam through the reservation land riding on her horse. She could spend the entire day riding her horse, travelling to visit friends and family, stopping by the general store, and then spending time alone, feeling free. The youngest of four children, Sara was raised by a “strong” single mom, “loving” maternal grandma, and a “tough” maternal grandpa. Until she was 10 years old, she lived in a hogan that had no running water or electricity. For Sarah, there were fond memories of living in that home. She smiled as she remembered sleeping with her mom and siblings in a full-size bed. Providing loving words when times were rough and celebrating in moments of joy, Sarah believed that “family is the backbone of everything.” She recalled always being with her mom and grandma because she did not want to miss an opportunity to learn something from them. Most days Sarah walked nearby to her grandparents’ home to ensure that her grandma remembered to take her insulin medicine and that her grandparents were both well and fed. Her four older siblings would jokingly tease her by calling her “the baby” because of her close connection to her grandparents and mom. Although her siblings teased her, they provided a sense of loving protection for Sarah. Sarah's family instilled a value for education in her. For example, Sarah cherished hearing her grandma say, “Nizhónígo [Go in Beauty], Nizhónígo, you’re going to school, keep at it.” Those words from her grandma were carried close in Sarah’s heart as a reminder to strive for education, for she was the first in her family with high aspirations to go to a university. Sarah's purpose in going to college was to one day return to Purple Hills and take care of her grandparents and mom because they were “everything to me.”

Navajo Traditional Story: The Twin Warriors Story. In addition to weaving the students’ stories, I also included a Navajo traditional oral story of the Twin Warriors story. The story rug was guided, organized, and constructed parallel to the Twin Warriors. I will share the traditional oral story of the Twin Warriors (also referred to as the Monster Slayers) and then I will elaborate on the woven connection between the Twin Warriors and the ten Navajo students.

Changing Woman (Asdzáá Nádleehé), a central figure in Navajo history and culture, gave birth to twin sons, Born for Water (Tóbajishchíní) and Monster Slayer (Naayéé’ Neizghání). When they reached adolescent age, the twins wanted to know who their father was so they went on a journey to find him. They were guided with favor by gods who created a holy trail paved with rainbows. On their journey, they met Spider Woman (Na’ashjé’ii Asdzáá)
who shared with the twins that their father was the Sun (Jóhonaa’éí). Spider Woman gave Born for Water and Monster Slayer tools and a prayer to aid them on their quest to find their father. The twins were grateful for Spider Woman’s assistance and continued on. As they travelled to find their father, they encountered four different obstacles. They survived each treacherous obstacle because of the tools and prayer that Spider Woman provided and that helped them to stay alive and continue on their journey.

When they finally reached their father’s home, Sun put the twins through various tests as a way to determine whether the twins were indeed his. The twins were guided by Wind (Níłch’i) and therefore the twins succeeded each test. Sun then asked, “Now, my children, what do you ask of me?” The twins sought help from their father, requesting that he provide them with weapons to slay the monsters (Naayéé) who were killing the Navajo people. Father Sun provided his children with weapons. The twins were grateful for their father’s help and went on their way to face the monsters.

The twin warriors first confronted the Big Giant (Yé’iitsoh) who was very big and powerful. The twins waited for the Big Giant to arrive at a lake which they were told was a place the monster went to daily. The Big Giant came to the lake to drink water and it was there that the twins struck the monster with lightning and arrows. The Big Giant fell down and died. The second confrontation was with the Horned Monster (Déélgééd) who was said to be hard to kill. With the help of Gopher (Na’azísí) and the weapons provided by father Sun, the Horned Monster was defeated. The third conquest was with Bird Monster (Tsé Ninahalééh) and the fourth monster defeated was Who Kills With His Eyes (Bináá’ yee Aghání).

After the twins conquered each monster, they returned home to their mother, Changing Woman, to share the news. Changing Woman rejoiced with her two sons and told the great news to the Navajo people. Through their valiant and courageous efforts, the twin warriors were considered heroes to the Navajo people.

In my first interview with one of the ten students, Cecilia, she mentioned the traditional Navajo story of the Twin Warriors as she remembered a high school experience. Cecilia and a classmate gave a presentation on alcoholism among Native Americans to a group of community members. It was at that time that a respected elder commented to her and her co-presenter that they were like the Navajo Twin Warriors. Cecilia recalled, “One of the elders in the group stood up and said, ‘You guys are like the epitome of the Twin Warriors. The Twin Warriors traveled from one world to the next to slay monsters and bring knowledge back to the people. You guys are just like the twin warriors, that’s amazing, you are bringing knowledge back to community.’” In sharing this experience Cecilia conceptualized how she joined other Native students who were embarking on
attending college. And as they navigate through that journey, they are recreating a contemporary version of the Twin Warriors story.

In acknowledging Cecilia’s connection to the Twin Warriors story and valuing the role that traditional oral stories have in Indigenous methodology, I included the Navajo Twin Warriors story in my dissertation by highlighting the contemporary “monsters” (challenges) and “weapons” (sources of strength) that influenced the ten Navajo students as they journeyed to college (Tachine, 2015).

Caring for the Story Rug: Conclusion

My mother-in-law, Alta Wauneka, is known in our family as a skilled rug weaver, so I spoke with her about the ending stages of rug weaving. She is patient and kind as she teaches me about Navajo weaving. With her wisdom and insight she shared a beautiful way of caring for the story rug. She told me that once a weaver has completed a Navajo rug, they carefully take it off of the loom by using a needle to unravel the strands that held the rug to the loom. Once the rug is off of the loom, finishing touches are applied to complete the rug. Some Navajos get a damp rag and wipe the rug. In that process, the rug becomes more flexible and is therefore gently stretched into a square or rectangle. Long ago, some Navajos would dig a hole in the ground, dampen the ground with water, and place the rug in the hole to rest. After a day, the weaver would take the rug out of the ground and stretch it in place. The purpose of the water is to nourish the rug, so that it becomes more flexible and thereby more easily stretched into form.

For the conclusion chapter, I took the story rug off of the loom and added finishing touches to ensure that it too would be properly cared for. The final chapter included a “stretching process” where I discussed implications for policy, practice, and research as well as critically examined the monsters and weapons concepts and their contributions to the literature. Then, I “left a strand out” as a way to culturally care for the story rug and for the future story rugs to come. The concept of leaving a strand out is an important distinction of the story rug; therefore, I describe that beautiful significance.

“Leave one strand out.” When a rug is finished, Navajo weavers often say, “leave one strand out,” meaning that you never close your rug. Alta told me that while weaving, all your thoughts go into the rug, the good thoughts and even the bad ones. Thus, when you are done with your rug, you should leave one strand out because you do not want those thoughts to be trapped. They need to go, to be free. That way you are able to focus on your next rug. With that cultural teaching, my story rug did not close with a typical conclusion; I left a strand out.

Freeing the Strand: Finishing Thoughts

Including metaphors and traditional stories were important steps in reclaiming Indigenous research in higher education. Connecting contemporary students’
experiences with the ancient Navajo Twin Warriors story provided a space where research could come to life, meaning illustrating and embodying monsters and weapons created a visual representation that I hope offered a deeper awareness of the connection between spirit and knowing. Contextualizing the dissertation as a rug weaving process not only helped me to organize my thoughts, but allowed individual and collective student stories to be tightly connected and yet individually honored.

Few studies center Indigenous perspectives and methodology in research. I believe that we as researchers create a systematic scholarship hierarchy whereby Native experiences and Indigenous inquiry continue to dwell at the bottom because of the sheer absence of Indigenous scholarship and lack of awareness about its rigor and value. There is a popular thought, “out of sight, out of mind,” suggesting that when we do not provide Indigenous experiences, perspectives, and methodology into the discourse, they will continue to be ignored and forgotten.

We need to raise awareness, through research, of an important group of people. This research needs to be done carefully with people who incorporate theories and methods that align with Native values and epistemologies. Working with Tribal nations and Native peoples can help to get a better sense of the type of research needed and the culturally nuanced research protocols to keep in mind. The research process may take longer as there would be another layer of people and number of protocols involved, but the outcome would be worth the time and effort.

Non-Natives can help by encouraging and advocating for Indigenous scholarship. I give much appreciation and credit to my dissertation advisor Dr. Jenny Lee who gently and critically nudged me to “dig deeper” in my research development. As a non-Native, she surrendered control by allowing me to lead in engaging with Indigenous methodology whereby she recognized her place in stepping back, which ultimately sparked the story rug framework. With her support and sincere belief in diverse knowledge production perspectives, I learned about the intellectual beauty and sacredness that Indigenous research offers.

NOTES

I am grateful to Dr. Jo-ann Archibald and Dr. Catherine Riessman for providing a space to allow stories to emerge by respecting the stories that are shared, valuing the knowledge gained through the analytical meaning-making process, and recognizing the interconnectedness between storyteller and listener.

1. Navajo traditional stories including the Twin Warriors story are often told by a male and during the winter months. To honor the students in this study, I share the story in a respectful manner so as to not insinuate that I’m an expert in the Twin Warriors story or in Navajo traditional oral stories. In my attempt to abbreviate a version of the Twin Warriors story, I acknowledge that I sought guidance from various books meant for a range of audience members, from children to adults (Iverson, 2002; Locke, 1992; Mabery, 1991; Austin,
Additionally, as a Navajo, I recall learning this story at various points in my life through oral storytelling in school settings, community meetings, and at occasional social functions with family and friends. Through these multiple sources and experiences, I share the Twin Warriors story in an abbreviated format. Oral storytelling acknowledges that there are various ways to share a story and multiple ways to interpret it; therefore, this version of the Twin Warriors story may be shared and interpreted differently based upon the person telling and the person listening. I encourage further reading and learning of the intricate teachings wrapped within Navajo traditional stories such as the Twin Warriors story, as these stories provide evolving life lessons.

REFERENCES


