

Skills for Nature Stewardship and Sharing Oral Stories

Guided by Dr. Joseph Bruchac, who is an Abenaki Elder, a poet, writer and storyteller, this toolkit is inspired by the Native American tradition of sharing stories. As you will notice, the activities we focus on are connected to the skills of observation, listening, remembering, and sharing, alongside respect and empathy for nature and the practice of inquiry. These skills are used in oral storytelling traditions, but they also come in handy when we try to be stewards of nature!

Dr. Bruchac was told by an Elder named Harold Tantaquidgeon, a Mohegan, that there are four steps you need to take when telling a story. First, you have to **listen**. Because the Creator gave us two ears and only one mouth, you must listen twice as much as you talk. The second is to use your two eyes to **observe**: Be sure you know what you're seeing before you begin to describe it or speak about it. The third step is to **remember**. When you remember what you've seen and heard, that becomes a guide. And if you don't remember, you can easily become lost or do the wrong things. The fourth step is to **share**, which brings your experiences back to the group. This is the job of the Elder and the storyteller and the writer: to take those things you've seen and heard and remembered, and then to share them, so the circle continues to go around.

Empathy and **respect** fit into every part of the circle. First of all, Dr. Bruchac says, you have to respect all life; that's one of the most important things. Without respect, everything falls apart. Empathy means that we can put ourselves in someone else's or some other being's place. When you see a useful plant sprouting out of the ground, you don't immediately consider it something to exploit or take. Instead, you see a living being with its own life, and you must therefore show respect.

In our toolkit, we focus on the following skills based on Dr. Bruchac's advice:

1) **Observation and listening**: These skills are developed based on the concept of slow-looking. [Slow-looking](#) (and the related skills of slow-listening and [slow-thinking](#)) "contends that patient, immersive attention to content can produce active cognitive opportunities for meaning-making and critical thinking that may not be possible through high-speed means of information delivery." (Shari Tishman)

2) **Curiosity and inquiry**: These skills focus on encouraging participants to ask questions about their observations and be curious about other people's thoughts and experiences.

3) **Documenting**: Documentation can take different forms, from writing down observations to drawing or even recording thoughts with a voice recorder. This exercise helps participants practice turning observations into concrete data and remembering them in the future; it also builds critical thinking abilities.

4) **Empathy and respect:** Scientific skills such as observation, inquiry, and documentation are tools for specific goals. However, our intention and worldview determine what those goals are. So, as a crucial part of the process, we must also focus on being empathetic and respecting the environment. Empathy-driven activities combine perspective-taking skills and curiosity to help audiences understand different points of view and others' needs.

5) **Sharing and communication:** The skills to communicate what one has observed and one's curiosities and thoughts can be developed by practicing different modes of communication, from writing and drawing to face-to-face or online interactions. Sharing observations about nature can also boost the participants' pro-nature conservation behavior.