

# Weaving Our Stories Conference in Blanding

10/31/2025



Last month, USU English Department faculty from the Blanding, Price, and Logan campuses presented at the Weaving Our Stories Conference in Blanding. The conference supports, celebrates, and engages with Native American students and communities within and beyond the USU system.

Genevieve Ford from the Blanding campus held a workshop entitled “Prioritizing Native Authorship to Promote Community.” The workshop surrounded research Genevieve has been doing since she arrived at USU. As a professor of children’s literature and English, when she arrived at USU, Genevieve wanted to learn more about children’s books from Native authors, honoring that 70% of students at Blanding campus come from the Navajo Nation, various Ute tribes in Utah, or other Native nations.

“I’ve noticed a huge surge in quality in books as major publishers have sat up and noticed that Native voices have a wide variety of things to say. In the last decade, there are new imprints like Heartdrum that focus on Native works, not to mention scholarships and workshops for new writers that have helped to bring more voices to print,” Genevieve comments, “I wanted to share what I’ve been researching for fifteen years at this conference, thinking it would be unfamiliar to many.”

Her presentation ended up being a conversation with elders who spent years on the frontline of education for Native kids as they sat in for the workshop. The elders told stories of helping Native students succeed in school, as well as helping non-Native educators avoid stereotypes and other pitfalls.

“If I’d known who would have been in the audience, I would have spent the whole time just passing around books and talking,” Genevieve reflects, “One thing I’ve learned from this amazing conference is to listen longer, to be more patient as a teacher, and the power of art and dance and stories to lift us up and help us understand each other.”

Josi Russell’s workshop was also around stories, entitled “Story-Based Course Design: Building Community Through Shared Adventures.” This workshop invited participants to experience a choose-your-adventure activity while learning about the power of story-based discourse. Workshop participants talked about how to create class or community discussions based around a central narrative and how narrative structures can transform classrooms and communities into spaces of collaboration.

“I chose to present at the Weaving Our Stories Conference because the topic resonates with me,” Josi says. “As a fiction writer, an associate professor, and a member of many varied communities, I believe that stories are the crossroads of our individual experiences. We meet each other at those crossroads, those moments when someone opens up and tells us a story. Hearing them allows us to gaze down the long road that led them here and gives us a chance to look over our shoulder to see back down our own road. Then, we look ahead at how our path is changed by the meeting.”

Ultimately, Josi’s presentation uncovered how story-based discourse can build unity, deescalate tense topics, and spark discovery and creativity. She comments, “Stories build understanding and connection. This conference created a space where creativity and scholarship were beautifully woven together, and attending it opened my eyes to powerful cultural, communicative, and creative forces that can change our world for the better.”

Another workshop that emphasized collaboration was Jeremy Ricketts’ presentation with Concurrent Enrollment teacher Shanda Winget. Their workshop was called “Weaving Community: Culturally Responsive Teaching and Collaborative Learning as Bridgework” and focused on how culturally responsive teaching and learning can serve as a bridge between members of the community, linking students to each other, instructors, and the wider community and world they are a part of.

The presentation focused on three phases of a meaningful learning experience: the beginning, which is how people are brought into a community; the middle, which challenges or sustains connection; and the end—and

beyond, which is what helps a connection last and thrive. The session included interactive activities focused around these three phases, and participants helped construct a living learning artifact, a collaborative toolkit that reflected the experiences and ideas shared in the workshop.

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Zackary Gregory's workshop, titled "Trail Building as Land Connection: Engaging Native Students in Stewardship through Outdoor Recreation in Blanding, Utah," told the story of his ongoing efforts to build a trail system and a trail building community at Blanding campus.

"I talked about what single track trails mean to me and focused on trails as a place where people connect and share experiences outside during turbulent times," Zackary notes. "I also talked about the metaphor I see between building a sustainable trail and building sustainable communities. A well-built trail lasts because it channels and deflects energy in the right direction. A well-built community does the same."

Finally, Kris Miller co-presented as the Director of the University Honors Program with Blanding Departmental Honors Advisor Danielle Ross and Statewide Honors Student Advisory Board Representative Sandra Benallie. Their presentation, "Dare to Know: USU Honors Can Support Your Leadership Journey," explained the value of the USU Honors Program and how a leadership role could help students make a difference in their communities.

"We decided to present again this year because we are actively trying to expand statewide engagement with the University Honors Program, and we launched an Associate with Honors pathway for two-year students this fall," Kris explains. "We talked with faculty, advisors, and students at the conference with the goal of gradually and thoughtfully building a more robust experience for all statewide students. I truly enjoyed the community at the conference, and I hope to participate again in the future."