



ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

Oral Traditions¹

ESSENTIAL UNDERSTANDINGS

- Since Time Immemorial
- History
- Lifeways

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Student will be able to:

- Discuss the importance of storytelling in maintaining the culture and ways of knowing and being for Native Americans
- Explain the important role of elders in passing down culture and history through stories
- Comprehend oral literature through listening and retelling skills
- Identify key elements in Native Americans' storytelling (in general, across tribes)
- Demonstrate the ability to create a story that includes explanations of nature and/or lessons of life
- Practice important elements of Native storytelling, including how to show emotion (humor, celebration, loss) or movement through retelling and dramatizing a story

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Overview

This lesson introduces students to two of the most important aspects of Native American culture, both past and present: oral storytelling and the role of elders within tribal communities.

Tribal nations and Indigenous communities in Oregon are varied and have multiple unique languages, world views, ways of life, and traditions. Like most cultures, they have many ways they communicate, preserve, and pass on their cultural and ceremonial traditions to future generations.

One of these ways is through oral tradition, in which information is passed down through the generations by word of mouth. There are many forms of oral tradition, including poems, songs, speeches, choreography, and spoken word. One of the most well-known forms of Native oral tradition is storytelling. Western oral tradition is often divided into categories of folktale, myth, and legend. Tribal nations do not make this distinction and simply say "stories" or "teachings."

¹ Activities and materials in this lesson have been adapted with permission from: Thacker, M. (n.d.). Pathway 1: Stories and histories of our place. In *Since time immemorial: Tribal sovereignty in Washington state: Elementary grade levels*. Retrieved from Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, Office of Native Education website: <http://www.k12.wa.us/IndianEd/TribalSovereignty/Primary-Pathway1.aspx>



ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- What can we learn about Native Americans' history and culture through storytelling?
- How can we use stories to understand ourselves, others, and the world?

LOGISTICS

- Where does the activity take place?
In the classroom with a variety of whole-class and partner work for engagement.
- How are the students organized?
☒ Whole class ☒ Teams: 3 – 5
☒ Pairs ☒ Individually

TIME REQUIRED

One to two days (two 60-minute blocks)

While each tribal nation and Indigenous community of Oregon has its own distinct language and identity, this lesson will provide a broad understanding of storytelling, including its purpose and its affirmation of community identity and well-being. This lesson will provide students the opportunity to appreciate the importance of storytelling to Native American tribes in Oregon. Through this experience students will also learn to become better storytellers by examining the key elements of Native storytelling. Using and adapting this information, students will create and share their own narrative.

STANDARDS

Oregon social sciences standards

4.7 - Explain the interactions between the Pacific Northwest physical systems and human systems, with a focus on Native Americans in that region.

4.10 - Describe how technological developments, societal decisions, and personal practices affect Oregon's sustainability (dams, wind turbines, climate change and variability, transportation systems, etc.).

4.11 - Analyze the distinct way of knowing and living amongst the different American Indian tribes in Oregon prior to colonization, such as religion, language, and cultural practices and the subsequent impact of that colonization.

4.14 - Examine the history of the nine federally recognized Oregon tribes.

Oregon ELA standards

4.RI.2 - Determine the main idea of a text and explain how it is supported by key details; summarize the text

4.RI.7 - Interpret information presented visually, orally, or quantitatively and explain how the information contributes to an understanding of the text in which it appears.

4.W.2 - Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas and information clearly.

4.SL.1 - Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 4 topics and texts, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

4.SL.5 - Add audio recordings and visual displays to presentations when appropriate to enhance the development of main ideas or themes.



The suggested extension activities provide teachers with additional ways to differentiate student learning.

Background for teachers

Oral storytelling is a form of communication and education that goes back thousands of years. Stories have always played an important role in sustaining the culture, history, and lifeways of Indigenous people. In fact, our brains are wired for storytelling because humans have been telling stories for a lot longer than they have been writing them. Print is a more recent human invention.

One of the great misperceptions regarding Native American storytelling traditions is that stories are conveyed as myths, legends, or lore. These terms imply that the content is entirely fictional and that its primary purpose is entertainment. In contrast, most Native American stories convey important cultural teachings, origin beliefs, and ancestral knowledge. To reduce these stories to the level of folklore is inaccurate and conveys a lack of understanding about the role of oral storytelling in Indigenous cultures. For the purposes of this lesson, we will use the terminology “story” or “teaching.”

Indigenous stories provide essential knowledge that is required to sustain and maintain certain ways of knowing and being. Each tribal nation has its own oral history, and these histories are just as valid as written records. Oregon tribal nations work hard to protect their lifeways and celebrate their ways of being and knowing. These cultural contexts of students are personal and private, and

MATERIALS

What materials are needed for students to engage in this activity?

- Selected stories from the Indian Reading Series: Stories and Legends of the Northwest (see Resources)
 - How Wild Horses Were Captured (the Warm Springs Tribe)
 - Coyote and the Stars (the Warm Springs Tribe)
 - Coyote the Trickster (the Burns Paiute Tribe)
 - How the Animals Got Their Colors (Klamath, Modoc, and Paiute Tribes)
 - Coyote Arranges the Seasons (Klamath, Modoc, and Paiute Tribes)
 - How Eagle Became Leader of All Birds (Klamath, Modoc, and Paiute Tribes)
 - Coyote and the Crane (Klamath, Modoc, and Paiute Tribes)
 - Indian Giant (Burns Paiute Tribe)
 - Indian Giant and Indian Mother (Burns Paiute Tribe)
- Legend from the Northern Paiute as told by Wilson Wewa.
- Post Story Chart: Print one for each student.
- Stories Planning Worksheet: Print one for each student.
- Ed Edmo, Native American Storyteller (Video) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LzFCkr5lwUg>



educators should be aware of this issue when asking students about their histories, cultural practices, and stories.

One aspect that is common to all Native American oral storytelling traditions is their deep appreciation for and understanding of the relationship with the earth. From the coast to the interior valleys to the Columbia Plateau and the Great Basin, tribal peoples maintain a continuous and balanced relationship with the natural world. The stories are varied and reflect the reciprocal relationship tribal nations have with their respective natural environments.

For example, Alsea (a Native American tribe in Western Oregon) teachings mention that swallows regularly return to the Oregon Central Coast just before the spring salmon run peaks, thus teaching tribal members the key time of year to harvest salmon.

Storytelling was often reserved for the winter months. One practical reason for this is that during the other seasons, community members were engaged in hunting and gathering. In addition, telling stories was a way to both entertain and teach children during the cold and dark evenings of winter.

The art of storytelling supports the learning of deep and complex topics. Rather than directly lecturing youth about social and cultural values, lessons were learned through emotionally engaging storytelling that related to aspects of tribal life and survival. Among many nations, a great storyteller was revered in the community.

VOCABULARY

Oral traditions – Passing down stories and histories through telling.

Native, Indigenous – Original to a place (as used in reference to peoples/tribes, plants, and animals); existing since time immemorial.

Elder – An older member of a tribe or community, specifically someone who has lived in a much earlier time period. An elder could be a parent, grandparent, aunt or uncle, or a teacher.

SUPPLIES

- Large sheet of butcher paper
- Set of color markers or crayons
- LCD projector or another type of computer projection device
- Any devices, tools, music, and so on that may be needed for storytelling (optional)



In most tribes, elders are the most important storytellers. Stories are often repeated, and some are only told at certain times of the year. As such, elders play a major role in educating children. They pass on the traditional knowledge and history from one generation to the next. Respect for elders is extremely important in Native communities. The elders are the keepers of tribal ways of knowing and living and are responsible for the preservation of all respective teachings.

Resources

- Indian Reading Series: Stories and Legends of the Northwest
<https://educationnorthwest.org/resources/indian-reading-series>
- Northwest Indian Storytellers Association (NISA) -
Wisdom of the Elders www.wisdomoftheelders.org
- Circle of Stories (PBS)
<http://www.pbs.org/circleofstories/educators/>
- California Indian Storytelling Association
www.actaonline.org
- The Oregon Encyclopedia
<https://www.oregonencyclopedia.org/themes/environment-and-natural-resources/>

Considerations for teachers

Assessment

- Students will engage in a substantial amount of discussion with partners and groups. The teacher should actively monitor student discussion for correct understanding, and the teacher should intervene when there are misconceptions or biases that could inhibit authentic engagement with this topic.



- Students should be assessed both formatively and summatively. The formative assessment will consist of teacher observation of student participation in discussion and critical analyses. Students will write and share an original story, which can be used for summative assessment.

Practices

- The teacher must understand the value of oral history and oral tradition to non-print cultures around the world.
- The teacher must be prepared to use strengths-based language to describe oral cultures, rather than a deficit mindset. Oral history should not be compared to the telephone game, for example, as a deficit that leads to unreliable stories.
- The teacher must be prepared to activate engagement strategies, such as think-pair-share, group discussion, mind mapping/open mind diagram, quick-write, carousel, question only, jigsaw, give one, get one, chalk talk, and whip around.

Learning targets

- I understand the importance of oral tradition to carrying forward the culture and traditions of Indigenous people.
- I can explain the role of elders in passing down culture and history through oral storytelling.
- I can comprehend oral traditions or literature through both listening and retelling skills.
- I can identify key elements in Native American storytelling.
- I can create and tell my own story.
- I can use certain strategies to engage my audience, including delivery, use of different voices, body movement, and humor.



Options/extensions

- Have students use their new storytelling skills to serve others: tell stories to younger students, at a campfire, or when caring for younger siblings.
- Have students interview someone in their family to find out a story from their own life. Retell their story to another family member, with their permission.
- Have students research the storytelling traditions of their ancestors.

Reflection/closure

- Review the learning targets.
- Have students think-pair-share about questions they might have as a result of their learning. Prompt for two or more each, and then let a few groups share their ideas out loud with the class.

Activity 1

Hook (Think-Write-Pair-Share)

Time: 10 minutes

Say:

An elder is an older person, specifically someone who has lived in a much earlier time period. An elder could be a parent, grandparent, aunt or uncle, or a teacher. Respect for elders is extremely important to the Native communities in Oregon. Elders play a major role in educating Native children. They pass along the traditional knowledge and history from one generation to the next through storytelling.

Step 1:

Ask students to think for one or two minutes about something they have learned from an elder or another significant figure in their life. Did the elder share with them a new skill (e.g., caring for siblings, cooking a traditional food, playing a game)? Was the elder also teaching them about a value through this skill (e.g., honesty, respect, or dedication)?

Step 2:

After one or two minutes of think time, direct students to write down those thoughts in a journal or on a piece of scratch paper.

Step 3:

Ask students to pair with a partner and discuss their thoughts for three or four minutes.

Note: The teacher can either allow students to select their partner or can assign pairs. Remember to be sensitive to learners' needs (reading and writing skills, attention skills, language skills) when assigning pairs. Some students might be sensitive to sharing some personal family knowledge.

Activity 1 (Continued)

Step 4:

Once partners have had enough time to share their thoughts, expand the “share” to a whole-class discussion. Record the class discussion on poster paper or a white board.

Step 5 (Optional):

If there is time after the classroom discussion, have students return to their pairs to talk about how their thinking may have changed as a result of the classroom discussion.

Say:

Can you recall any other important lessons you learned from an elder in your life?



Activity 2

Oral Storytelling (Listen, Retell, Create)

Time: One or two instructional days
(Two blocks of 60 minutes)

Say:

From the beginning of time, humans have been curious creatures, trying to understand our environment and our purpose here on Earth. We have always been curious about our history and about why things happen. For this next activity, we have the privilege to listen to a traditional Native story as told by Ed Edmo, who is an accomplished traditional Shoshone-Bannock storyteller.

As you listen, put yourself in the shoes of a tribal member who must learn the art of storytelling. Think about “how” this story is being shared.

Step 1:

Show students the video: SOCAP14-Ed Edmo, Wisdom Elder - A Story (6:44)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LzFCkr5lwUg&t=13s>

Step 2:

Facilitate a classroom discussion about the art of storytelling. Ask students to share out what they noticed about “how” this story about Porcupine and Buffalo was shared. How did the storyteller engage his audience? Record and post student answers.

Example answers:

- Use of props
- Body movement
- Voices/sounds
- Repetition
- Audience participation
- Humor



Activity 2 (Continued)

Say:

Next, it is going to be your turn to retell as much of this story as you can to a partner. We're going to watch and listen to the video one more time. Listen closely and try to remember key details.

Step 3:

Show students the video: SOCAP14-Ed Edmo, Wisdom Elder - A Story (6:44)

Step 4:

Have each student take a turn telling the story in their own words. Depending on your classroom dynamics, you may need to remind students not to tease each other or laugh if details are forgotten or changed. Students should simply do the best they can.

Say:

OK, great job retelling the story. Now, let's discuss some key questions. What values were being conveyed in this story? What land features, plants, and animals were in this story? I'm going to give you a graphic organizer to record your thoughts. It's OK to work alone or with partners in your group to complete the graphic organizer.

Step 5:

Pass out the Post Story Chart and have students begin working. Monitor the class as students work and discuss, and help them find details that support their ideas:

Say:

OK, it looks like everyone has completed the Post Story Chart. Let's have a few people share their ideas.



Activity 2 (Continued)

Step 6:

Have a few students share. As needed, give students feedback.

Say:

Great work! Let's listen and discuss another Native story and complete our Post Story Chart.

Step 7:

Share two to three more stories you have selected from the resources listed in this lesson. These stories may be shared through video using an Indigenous storyteller or can be read aloud by the teacher.

Note: Whenever possible, seek permission from the relevant Native American tribe before sharing one of their traditional stories with a public audience.

Step 8:

Distribute one copy of Storytelling Planning Chart to each student. Model the process for filling in this graphic organizer. Provide students with a list of ideas for creating their own story/teaching.

Ideas for stories about why things came to be:

- Why is the ocean salty?
- How did a dog's tail get its wag?
- Why do some birds migrate and other do not?
- Why do bears hibernate?
- How did a certain land formation come to be?

Activity 2 (Continued)

Ideas for stories about important values:

- Honesty
- Sharing
- Respect of elders
- Perseverance
- Generosity
- Regard for the natural world

Step 9:

Provide students with 5-10 minutes to independently complete their Storytelling Planning Chart. Walk the room and provide feedback on students' plans.

Step 10:

Have students draft their stories using your district's language arts story-writing curriculum processes. As the teacher, you have flexibility in the amount of time spent on planning, drafting, editing, and completing final drafts of stories. Time to complete this activity will vary by teacher.

Step 11:

Have students become the storyteller. Students can memorize their story (or use flashcards for assistance) and present it to the classroom or to a lower grade (K-3) classroom.