

Blackfoot Warrior Shirts

Lesson Plan: Blackfoot Winter Counts and their stories

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Background:

Recently, I visited my granddaughter, Teesh Ansh's, second grade class in an elementary school in Missoula, Montana, U.S. Teesh Ansh was determined to have me teach her classmates about Napi, the Blackfoot trickster. We spent an hour re-telling and role-playing a Napi story. This classroom visit inspired me to continue to look for ways to incorporate Blackfoot ways of knowing into the primary grades.

I am grateful that my granddaughter has the opportunity and is encouraged to share her Blackfoot heritage in a classroom setting. Teesh Ansh's school experiences are in stark contrast to my own experiences a few decades ago, at the Indian Residential schools where I was made to feel ashamed of my Blackfoot culture. Teesh Ansh and other Native American children in the state of Montana are extremely fortunate because of the state-wide educational support of Indigenous ways of knowing:

the Montana supreme court ruled in 2004 that the state's constitutional guarantee "of a basic system of free quality public elementary and secondary schools" must include educational programs to implement Article X, Section 1 (2), the provision that recognized Indians' cultural heritage and committed the State to making their cultural preservation a goal for our education system. The result was a new definition of quality education that includes what has become known as *Indian*

Education for All [italics added] and a 2005 legislation appropriation to help school districts meet this definition of a quality education (Juneau, 2006, p. 1)

Why is the Montana legislation of *Indian Education for All* relevant to our discussion? Aside from the fact that I have grandchildren being educated in that state, it is also important to point out that the U.S. – Canada international border is relatively new to the Blackfoot. The *Medicine Line*, or the border, as was referred to by the Blackfoot, succeeded in separating the Blackfoot Confederacy. The traditional Blackfoot territory consisted of the North Saskatchewan River as the northern boundary, and the Yellowstone River as the southern boundary. The Rocky Mountains marked the western boundary with the Cypress Hills in the province of Saskatchewan as the eastern boundary.

Pitt Rivers Museum Blackfoot Warrior Shirts Homepage

The primary aim of this lesson plan is to provide ideas on how teachers and students can work with the Pitt Rivers Museum website, ‘*Kaahsinnooniksi Ao'toksisawooyawa - Our ancestors have come to visit: Reconnections with historic Blackfoot shirts,*’ at: <http://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/blackfootshirts/index.html>. The challenge is ensuring that all curricular requirements are met while working with this site. Most importantly, educators need to keep in mind that *we teach students not subjects*, therefore every aspect of teaching, in my opinion, needs to keep the students’ educational growth and well being at the forefront as we plan our lessons.

Grade 2 Language Arts Curriculum

My 14-year teaching career took place on the Blood Indian Reserve in Southern Alberta; therefore this lesson plan will utilize the Grade 2 Alberta Program of Studies as the curricular foundation. However, this lesson plan can easily be adapted to any elementary language arts curriculum guide.

The Kindergarten through Grade 9 Language Arts Program of Studies basically follows the same **5 General Outcomes**:

General Outcome 1

Students will listen, speak, read, write, view and represent to explore thoughts, ideas, feelings and experiences.

General Outcome 2

Students will listen, speak, read, write, view and represent to comprehend and respond personally and critically to oral, print and other media texts.

General Outcome 3

Students will listen, speak, read, write, view and represent to manage ideas and information.

General Outcome 4

Students will listen, speak, read, write, view and represent to enhance the clarity and artistry of communication.

General Outcome 5

Students will listen, speak, read, write, view and represent to respect, support and collaborate with others.

Each grade level differs in the **Specific Learning Outcomes**. This lesson plan will make direct connections to both the General Outcomes and to the following relevant Specific Learning Outcomes at the Grade 2 level:

Specific Learning Outcomes:

General Outcome 1

1.1 Discover and Explore

Express ideas and develop understanding
Experiment with language and forms

Set goals

1.2 Clarify and Extend

- Consider others' ideas**
- Combine ideas**

General Outcome 2

2.1 Use Strategies and Cues

- Use prior knowledge**
- Use comprehension strategies**

2.2 Respond to Texts

- Experience various texts**
- Construct meaning from texts**
- Appreciate the artistry of texts**

2.3 Understand Forms, Elements and Techniques

- Understand forms and genres**
- Understand techniques and elements**
- Experiment with language**

2.4 Create Original Text

- Generate ideas**
- Elaborate on the expression of ideas**
- Structure texts**

General Outcome 3

3.1 Plan and Focus

- Focus attention**
- Determine information needs**
- Plan to gather information**

3.2 Select and Process

- Use a variety of sources**
- Access information**

3.3 Organize, Record and Evaluate

- Organize information**
- Evaluate information**

3.4 Share and Review

- Share ideas and information**
- Review research process**

General Outcome 4

4.1 Enhance and Improve

Appraise own and others' work
Expand knowledge of language
Enhance artistry

4.3 Present and Share

Present information
Enhance presentation
Use effective oral and visual communication
Demonstrate attentive listening and viewing

General Outcome 5

5.1 Respect Others and Strengthen Community

Appreciate diversity
Relate texts to culture
Celebrate accomplishments and events
Use language to show respect

5.2 Work Within a Group

Cooperate with others
Work in groups
Evaluate group process

Lesson Plan

Learner Objectives and Goals:

1. Students will examine the photograph of the Blackfoot Warrior Shirt that depicts a Blackfoot winter count on the front of the shirt (1893.67.1). See <http://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/blackfootshirts/html/photographs.html>

Students will explore and discuss the possible meanings of the winter count on the shirt.
2. The students will write a creative story about their own interpretation of the winter count depicted on the shirt.
3. Students will create their own winter counts depicting their own life stories.

4. Students will share their winter count stories with others thus reflecting the Blackfoot oral tradition.

Learner Objective #1:

The photograph will be projected onto a screen to enable the students to view the shirt at a magnified level. (There are images of the painted shirt, and a digitally enhanced image of the paintings, on the website.) The students will brainstorm what they see depicted on the shirt (i.e. a horse, tipi, rifles, people, etc...). The teacher will write their responses on the board. The students will also think of possible meanings for each symbol. Each response should be validated and respected. The teacher will then relate the following anecdote in regards to the winter count depicting the man stealing the horse:

Usually, the fastest horses were the most prized possession of the Blackfoot. These fast horses were known as the buffalo runners because they could outrun the buffalo during a hunt and they were also used in battles and raids on other tribes. The buffalo runners or fast horses were usually tied to a stake, which was located inside the tipi where the horse's owner could see it. It was the buffalo runners that horse raiders would go after first. If a buffalo runner could be taken without the owner's awareness, it was considered a real *coup* or a major accomplishment on behalf of the horse raider. Therefore, the depiction of the man stealing a horse was most certainly the owner of the shirt's most memorable moment in life.

Learner Objective #2:

The teacher will use the following analogy to explain the next activity. When a poet writes a poem, he or she is usually not around to give an exact interpretation of his or her

poem. Likewise, the original owner of this shirt is no longer around to tell us explicitly what his winter counts are depicting. Therefore, it's up to us to respond or interpret what the poem, and in this case, what the winter count is depicting. Therefore, the students are to be encouraged to come up with their own version of the rest of the winter counts depicted on the shirts.

Each student is to write a creative story of his or her interpretation of the winter count depicted on the shirt. Encourage the students to make reference to all of the symbols on the shirt. Students are also encouraged to share their stories with a partner. Remind the students that the Blackfoot are an oral society; therefore storytelling is a huge component of their way of life. So, they should tell rather than read their stories to each other.

Learner Objective #3:

The next task is for the students to create their own winter count symbols to depict their own stories. The teacher will remind the students that Blackfoot winter counts were as individual as the storytellers themselves. Although it is encouraged that each student comes up with his or her own symbols for this activity, he or she can also use some of the symbols on the shirt itself. For more ideas of Blackfoot winter counts see Raczka (1979).

Remind the students that only the most significant events of their lives should be depicted on their winter counts. This activity can be done on a piece of paper, a piece of canvas or a piece of tanned hide. Winter count symbols can be written with permanent markers or paintbrushes. The teacher will decide which medium is most appropriate and available for his or her students. If the teacher is able to use canvas or tanned hide, then it

would be a good idea to also lace the material onto a wooden frame consisting of 4 sticks tied together with a string or a piece of leather.

Learner Objective #4:

The students will be encouraged to display their winter counts on a bulletin board. Each student should be given an opportunity to share his or her winter count story with the entire class. This should be treated as a celebration of each child's personal success stories.

References

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