Unit Overview: Oral Traditions

Overview

The Oral Traditions unit explores personal stories and the oral histories of various cultures including Aboriginal peoples. At all three levels of instruction (introductory, intermediate and advanced), there is an examination of storytelling forms and techniques, as well as the social and cultural importance of storytelling. The activities in this unit allow students to develop and practise skills in listening, reading, critical analysis, group discussion and presenting.

Learning Objectives

Students will:
- understand and appreciate the function of the oral tradition in various cultures, including those of First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples
- develop and practise skills in listening, reading, critical analysis, group discussion and presenting.

Focus for Instruction

Select the appropriate level based on the knowledge and abilities of your students.

Introductory Level
- Connect the concept of oral histories to students’ own experiences.
- Identify personal family stories and explore their origin, purpose or significance.
- Experience a selection of stories from various cultures.
- Listen to a storyteller (Elder or professional storyteller) to experience how traditional knowledge is woven into the stories.
- Identify and practise listening skills and strategies.
- Identify and use storytelling techniques.

Intermediate Level
- Understand that cultures have stories on various topics that fulfill a variety of purposes.
- Experience storytelling first-hand.
- Use techniques to enhance the effect of stories.
- Develop an appreciation for the craft of storytelling.
- Appreciate the importance of oral tradition as the foundation of traditional First Nations, Métis and Inuit legends and/or stories.

Advanced Level
- Read and compare stories from different cultural groups (at least three).
- Appreciate similarities and differences among cultural beliefs expressed in stories.
• Appreciate the importance of oral tradition as the foundation of traditional First Nations, Métis and Inuit approaches to teaching and learning.
• Understand how language impacts the meaning of a story.
• Express ideas about the effectiveness and/or appeal of a story examined.

Preparation

Before beginning the unit, teachers may wish to enhance their knowledge of Aboriginal perspectives, the origins and functions of the oral tradition, and the role of Elders. One good source of information is *Aboriginal Perspectives*, the basic resource for Aboriginal Studies 10. See Aboriginal Peoples in Canada (Chapter 1), The Oral Tradition (Chapter 2), Worldview (Chapter 3) and Symbolism and Expression (Chapter 7).

Each level in this unit requires teachers to select stories that originated in the oral tradition from various cultures. A list of books and Web sites is included in this unit overview as a starting point. The list includes reference materials to help teachers enhance their background knowledge. The resources on this list are provided as a courtesy and have not been reviewed or authorized by Alberta Education.

Instructional Strategies

An important way to engage students is to connect to their previous knowledge and experiences. Asking students to share their own stories and explore their own cultures provides a context for understanding Aboriginal oral traditions. When establishing this link, teachers should be aware of sensitive issues and explain that some personal stories are not meant to be shared in the classroom.
Provide opportunities for students to experience live storytelling by Aboriginal peoples. Bring in guest speakers or have students attend storytellers’ events and festivals. Check the Storytellers of Canada Web site for a list of events. The Alberta League for Encouraging Storytelling also offers workshops and events.

It may be helpful for teachers to examine traditional Aboriginal teaching methods. Incorporating traditional techniques may help teachers and students develop authentic understanding of Aboriginal perspectives.

Another instructional strategy to examine is digital storytelling. Many activities in this unit require students to present personal, cultural or fictional stories. Students who struggle with oral presentations and/or with listening may benefit from the option of digital storytelling. In this increasingly popular technique, students create digital texts that combine their own voice-over narration with other elements, such as photographs, film footage, drawings, music and type. Just like oral and written stories, digital stories can be humourous, serious, tragic or inspirational. Information and tools related to digital storytelling are included in the unit overview.
We are all Storytellers

All cultures have stories that are passed on from generation to generation in a variety of ways. Cultures with the ability to mass-produce the printed word have moved away from telling their stories orally.

While a written record has many merits and is beneficial in passing on knowledge, experiences and beliefs, it has limitations as well. With oral stories, it is important to remember details by retelling them frequently. With written stories, this is not the case, making it less likely the stories will be memorized and repeated. Written texts also lack the interpretive nature of storytelling. All the elements that make up the unique voice of individuals are part of what makes the oral story a unique experience. Tone, pitch, variation, emphasis and body language can be critical to the way a story is experienced, understood and remembered.

Perhaps what is most important is the effect that sharing a story has on the storyteller and the audience. The sharing of anecdotes, personal beliefs and experiences forms the foundation of relationships. With each story that is recounted, trust is gained and deepens. Reciprocity is common, but it is not a necessary element. Many storytellers are not good listeners, perhaps because everything they hear brings to mind another story to tell—but that is part of what makes them good storytellers.

The Aboriginal Way

Oral traditions and storytelling are at the heart of Aboriginal cultures in many ways. Oral traditions are the primary method for passing on everything from spiritual beliefs to survival skills. Stories perform both a philosophical and practical role. For example, Hart (1996) explains that discussions, including stories, have an important function for healers providing help and for Elders in their teachings.

The fact that stories were predominantly transmitted orally has resulted in the development of rich languages and an exceptional ability for remembering and relating beliefs, traditions and events. In From Our Eyes: Learning from Indigenous Peoples, Douglas West explains the importance of storytelling:

“The methods (ways) and truths of storytelling always outlive the attempts we make to analyze their contents and meanings. Stories change because people cannot stay the same, and the messages and morals of stories can cause varieties of choices and behaviours. It is the act and art of storytelling that is primary…” (in O’Meara and West 1996, p. 1).
West points out the significance of the “act and art” of storytelling over and above content and meaning. Stories are reflexive in that they transform the teller and in turn are revised by him or her each time they are told.

For First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples, the oral tradition “continues to be a significant component of their traditional values and beliefs” (Hart in O’Meara and West 1996, p. 63). This rich tradition carries over into the contemporary literature of Aboriginal peoples. As Flora Zaharia, a Métis educator, says in Our Bit of Truth: An Anthology of Canadian Native Literature, “…the love of oral storytelling tradition has enriched the styles of Aboriginal writers exploring contemporary concerns through poetry, short stories, drama and novels” (Grant 1990, p. v).

“Before Native literature can be fully appreciated for its unique qualities it is imperative to identify assumptions underlying the cultural beliefs and practices of Métis and Native societies. Native mythology underlies much contemporary writing; visions and dreams played a vital role in the lives of traditional people, and their influences are still felt in contemporary writing. The style of the literature is influenced by the shape and content of mythology, so literary devices which reflect this creative source of oral expression are used” (1990, p. viii).

Therefore, a study of Aboriginal literature must originate with the oral tradition of storytelling.

The Stories

The multifaceted objectives of Aboriginal stories must be considered when attempting to interpret or understand them. Aboriginal legends and traditional stories have many subjects and functions, from explaining the origins of people and things, to teaching and practical moral lessons, to illuminating natural phenomena and cycles.

While traditional stories have some characteristics distinct from other cultures, they have many commonalities too. All cultures have stories that arise out of a society’s experiences, belief systems and context. When embarking on a study of a people’s stories, it is important to consider myth as one of the foundations of a society’s customs and beliefs. The prevailing attitude in society is that myths are fictional and belong in the same class as fairy tales, rather than in the category of religious stories, such as parables and testaments. Our expectations when examining myths or legends, Grant counters, should be that we “will learn about the culture’s history, beliefs or moral insights” (1990, p. 2) rather than simply be entertained by the products of the imagination.
Bibliography


Aboriginal Worldviews

Traditionally, the peoples of First Nations cultures have seen themselves holistically, as part of nature. Many First Nations peoples maintain this worldview. They believe that every animal, plant, place and person has a spirit. They recognize that their continued existence depends not only on an abundant supply of healthy animals but also on the environment in which these animals live. They use only what they need and respect creation. Some cultures, like the Cree, view themselves within a web. Inside this web is the Creator, the earth, the animals of the earth and humans. All the life forces on Earth are respected because they are interconnected. Traditional First Nations peoples are also spiritual in their regard for nature. Blackfoot speakers indicate that animals are sacred by saying “likawaato’sllyaw” (“They have power”). The dog and the horse are especially given this regard.

How First Nations peoples teach their young reflects this worldview. The education process is holistic and everything is taught in context. Language learning is facilitated through listening and actual use of the language. Science is learned through observation and participation in clan or tribal activities. Social studies is learned through the strong family ties and the social structure of particular Aboriginal peoples. Large national gatherings expand this knowledge. Specialization is limited to those young people whom Elders choose to become apprentices as historians, medicine people, herbalists and ceremonialists.

This section describes specific instructional techniques. These strategies and approaches do not stand alone and should be integrated into the larger unit of study.

Storytelling

Storytelling is part of the long-standing oral tradition of Aboriginal communities. Storytelling is interactive; it makes the listener responsible for listening. Not only does this technique pass on knowledge from old to young, it ensures knowledge is accurate because of frequent repetition. It is a form of lifelong learning for members of a community and is still practised by Aboriginal peoples.

Storytelling often takes place in homes. Some traditional storytelling happens at social gatherings. For both storytellers and listeners, the stories are instructive and entertaining. Historical knowledge is passed on. Bravery, honesty, loyalty, respect for the environment and other values are illustrated by events in the stories, and indirectly, are passed on. Knowledge about the origin of sacred ceremonies is also passed on in this fashion. Children pick up details about their history and culture, and strengthen their language skills through listening and repeating.
There is storytelling protocol to be followed. As a story unfolds and at strategic moments, listeners are expected to show they are listening. This is done verbally, using the equivalent of “yes” in an Aboriginal language. This response indicates comprehension. If an individual does not understand, he or she simply asks for clarification.

**Ideas, tips, suggestions for use of this technique**

- Select a trickster story from any of the various Aboriginal peoples of Alberta. Read it and have students discuss what they learned from it. The trickster has many names, including *Wisahkekâhk* (Cree), Raven Head (Dene), or *Naapi* (Niitsitapi).

- Select two or more trickster stories for students to listen to. Have them determine the common features of these stories. They should be able to figure out whether the trickster is Naapi, *Wisahkekâhk*, Raven Head or someone else. Following this activity, bring in a storyteller to discuss what a trickster is.

- On the recommendation of a knowledgeable person, such as an employee of a Friendship Centre, invite a First Nations storyteller to class to tell one or two traditional stories.

- Using an anthology of First Nations stories, have students determine what other types of stories there are and why these stories are considered worth saving and repeating.

**Hands-on/Experiential Learning**

Hands-on, experiential learning was probably the most natural way for traditional Nakoda, Cree, Dene, Métis and other Aboriginal children to learn. Participating in the construction of a canoe using a birch tree was an invaluable lesson for a Dene child. The same could be said for a Nakoda youth participating in a bear-hunting expedition with an uncle or older cousin.

Under the tutorship of older, more experienced members of a nation, novices were taught lifesaving lessons essential for survival in a particular environment. For example, Plains First Nations, who depended on the bison, taught their children how to kill and prepare the bison. Northern people practised trapping and fishing in addition to hunting, and taught their children lifesaving activities, such as how to build canoes, snowshoes and toboggans. Young men apprenticing to become mature warriors and hunters needed to know how to construct weapons, such as spears and bows and arrows, as well as how to use them.

Young people were tested on their skills in some societies. For example, in Dene society young hunters were sent out alone to prove that they could survive. If they were successful, they were considered mature.

Girls also gained much knowledge through experiential learning. By puberty, girls had most of the skills they needed to contribute to society. Women did the important job of obstetrics (midwifery). All young girls watched and learned about childbirth. This still holds true in some Aboriginal cultures. Girls learned how to preserve and cook food. They were also taught how to fish and to hunt small game, such as rabbits, muskrats and small fowl.
Nature dictated that survival techniques like these be passed on in a practical manner, partly because early First Nations peoples were nomadic. Even though they occupied a particular territory for long periods of time, they were always on the move within that territory. The movements of all tribes were dictated by the presence of the animals they killed and by the seasons.

Experiential learning is still an important technique in Aboriginal cultures, as cultural and practical knowledge is passed on through hands-on activities.

**Ideas, tips, suggestions for use of this technique**

- Invite a First Nations craftsperson to class to show students his or her work. Secure the necessary supplies so the guest can help students make simple beaded necklaces or wristbands.

- Have students research the ingredients of traditional pemmican to determine its food value. Compare this with a diet that includes white bread, fried potatoes, fried meat and pop. How has this change in the diet of many First Nations peoples effected their health?

- From a knowledgeable source, such as Friendship Centre personnel, find an Elder or First Nations person who knows how to make pemmican. Invite him or her to class to make pemmican with students. Discuss how meat could be dried today so that it could be made into pemmican. Pemmican (pîmēcan) is a Cree word and is a mix of dried meat and berries.

- Invite a dancer from an Aboriginal community to class to show students two or three social dances. Have students research the traditional dances of different Aboriginal peoples and determine how intertribal contact has enriched modern Aboriginal powwows.

- Have students listen to various contemporary Aboriginal singers, such as Susan Aglukark, Buffy Sainte-Marie, Walela, Jack Gladstone and Kashtin. Have them analyze the lyrics for messages. Encourage students to learn one of these songs.
Many students find the act of creating and sharing their own stories to be a wonderful and engaging learning experience. However, some students struggle with standing up in front of the class and telling stories orally. Some students may also find it difficult to listen to a succession of oral stories with no visual component. One way to overcome this challenge, appeal to multiple learning styles and support Information and Communication Technology outcomes is through digital storytelling.

**What is Digital Storytelling?**

Students create digital texts that combine their own voice-over narration with other elements, such as photographs, film footage, drawings, music and type in order to tell a story. Just like oral and written stories, digital stories can be humorous, serious, tragic or inspirational. They can be personal, fictional, historical or any other type of story.

**Incorporating Digital Storytelling into Lessons**

Teachers may assign digital storytelling to all students or offer it as an option. It is important to identify and discuss both the similarities and differences between digital storytelling and traditional storytelling, so students understand how digital storytelling fits into the larger unit of study.

Digital stories may take longer to create than oral stories. Time lines may need to be adjusted so students can access the necessary technology and work through the additional stages of production.

A student handout and planning tool are included in the following pages.

**Accessing Technology**

While some students may be able to use sophisticated video editing and graphics software, digital stories can be created using relatively inexpensive and easily accessible technology. At a minimum, all you need is access to voice recording software, a scanner (or previously digitized images) and some kind of multimedia production or presentation software to put it all together.
Although camcorders may be used in the creation of digital stories, they are not essential. In fact, they may be a distraction from the end product. Many digital stories rely heavily on photographs, hand-drawn illustrations, and other scanned-in images, along with transition effects, to accompany the recorded narrative.


**Finding More Information**

The following Web sites provide information, examples and links to resources that may help you incorporate digital storytelling in your classroom.

Center for Digital Storytelling  
https://www.storycenter.org/

Digitales  
http://www.digitales.us

The Elements of Digital Storytelling (University of Minnesota School of Journalism and Mass Communication’s Institute for New Media Studies)  
http://www.inms.umn.edu/elements/
A digital story is a digital text that combines your own voice-over narration with other elements, such as photographs, film footage, drawings, music and type, to tell a story. Just like oral and written stories, digital stories can be humourous, serious, tragic or inspirational. They can be personal, fictional, historical or any other type of story.

To make your digital story as effective as possible, follow these tips.

**Make it Personal**
As the creator of the digital story, you are the narrator and may also be the main character. If your story is nonfiction and is about other people, make it clear how the people or events in the story impacted your life.

**Begin with the Story**
Before you start digitizing images, importing sound effects or using video editing tools, it is important to write your script. This way you can use the technology better to tell your story.

**Be Concise**
Typically, a digital story runs from two to five minutes. Try to narrow the story down to one central idea or message.

**Include Universal Story Elements**
Good stories include essential elements such as conflict, transformation and closure. Furthermore, they are told in a way that engages the audience and has an impact on them.

**Ask for Feedback**
Stories are meant to be shared. Show your ideas, script and finished product to your teacher, a classmate, a friend or your family. Ask what effect the story had on them and if they have any suggestions for improving it.

Steps for Creating a Digital Story

Step #1
Identify the message you want to relay, and create a story revealing that message.

OR

Step #2
Identify a topic, person or event in your life that you want to focus on.

Step #3
Plan your writing. Think of ways to make the story exciting and interesting without changing the facts.

Step #4
Write a rough draft of the story/script.

Step #5
Revise and edit your draft, keeping in mind the effect you want to have on your audience.

Step #6
Collect or create photographs, drawings, video clips, music and any other media that you can use to tell your story.

Step #7
Create a storyboard to show which lines from your story go with which photos or other media.

Step #8
Record your script.

Step #9
Create your digital story using multimedia production or presentation software.

Step #10
Present your digital story.

Reflect on your work and the process you followed to complete your story. What would you do differently next time?
Fill in the information in this organizer and then follow it as you create your digital story.

Audience: ____________________________________________________________

Message: ___________________________________________________________

Story Outline:

Who is the story about?

What do the characters do?

When does the story take place?

Why do the characters do what they do?

How does the story turn out?

Where does the story take place?
### Images

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### Multimedia; e.g., animation, transitions, music

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### Design; e.g., colours, fonts

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### Storyboard Template:

Use this template to create a complete storyboard on paper or posterboard.

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Transitions
Voiceover
Effects
Soundtrack
Notes
Suggested Resources

Books

The resources listed below have been suggested by Alberta teachers as useful. Included are print resources, intended primarily for teachers, as well as Web site and multimedia resources that students could access. The resources listed below are not authorized by Alberta Education.

Note: The listing of unauthorized resources is not to be taken as explicit or implicit departmental approval for use. The titles have been provided as a service only, to help school authorities identify resources that contain potentially useful ideas. The responsibility to evaluate these resources prior to selection rests with the user, in accordance with any existing local policy. The user is also responsible for evaluating any materials listed within the resource itself.


Erdoes, Richard and Alfonso Ortiz, eds. *American Indian Myths and Legends.* New York: Pantheon Books, 1984. Well-attributed collection of many diverse traditional stories of Native America. Like any other body of mythology, some of the stories involve adultery, rape or sexual situations, so be sensible about which ones you share with young children.


________. *The Punishment of the Stingy and Other Indian Stories.* Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1982.


Mourning Dove (Humishum). *Coyote Stories*. Ed. and ill. Heisha Dean Guie with notes by L. V. McWhorten (Old Wolf) and a foreword by Chief Standing Bear. Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1990.


**Web Sites**

“The Oral Tradition in the Arctic” – Interview with Agnes Nanogak Goose (video clip)  

Aboriginal Classroom Resources  
[http://www.schoolnet.ca/aboriginal/e/classroom_e.asp](http://www.schoolnet.ca/aboriginal/e/classroom_e.asp)

First Nations of Canada Virtual Tour  
[http://www.saskschools.ca/%7Esss_seahawk/aboriginal/tour.htm](http://www.saskschools.ca/%7Esss_seahawk/aboriginal/tour.htm)

Michif (Métis) Historical and Cultural Preservation Society  
[http://www.vcn.bc.ca/michif/](http://www.vcn.bc.ca/michif/)

The “Other” Métis  
[http://www.othermetis.net/index.html](http://www.othermetis.net/index.html)

Chi Ki Ken Da Mun: So You Should Know – Book of lessons on Aboriginal peoples  
[http://www.nald.ca/CLR/chikiken/cover.htm](http://www.nald.ca/CLR/chikiken/cover.htm)

First Perspective: Online Aboriginal News Source  
[http://www.firstperspective.ca](http://www.firstperspective.ca)

Greek Mythology: Heroes  
Animated stories of Jason, Hercules, Bellerophon, Theseus, Odysseus and Perseus.  

Short Story of Pandora  
(for students needing fewer reading challenges)  
[http://www.pantheon.org/articles/p/pandora.html](http://www.pantheon.org/articles/p/pandora.html)

Short Story of Perseus  
(for students needing fewer reading challenges)  
[http://www.pantheon.org/articles/p/perseus.html](http://www.pantheon.org/articles/p/perseus.html)

Stories, Folklore, and Fairy Tales Theme Page  
[http://www.cln.org/themes/fairytales.html](http://www.cln.org/themes/fairytales.html)
“The Blind Boy and the Loon”

*True Stories - Many Truths* – Links to biographies, full text stories
http://www.kstrom.net/isk/stories/stories.html

Creation, Migration, Origin stories
http://www.indians.org/welker/legend.htm

**Online Speeches**

“Chief Seattle’s 1854 Oration”
http://www.indigenouspeople.net/seattle1.htm

Speeches by Native Americans
http://www.geocities.com/katevo.geo/speeches.html

Indigenous People: Famous Documents
http://www.indigenouspeople.net/stories2.htm

American Rhetoric: Online Speech Bank
http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speechbank.htm