

The Place of Story in Native Culture

Wisconsin DPI Standards Alignment:

Social Studies B.4.10 -- Explain the history, culture, tribal sovereignty, and current status of the American Indian tribes and bands in Wisconsin.

Social Studies B.8.11 – Summarize major issues associated with the history, culture, tribal sovereignty, and current status of the American Indian tribes and bands in Wisconsin.

Social Studies E.4.8 -- Describe and distinguish among the values and beliefs of different groups and institutions.

Social Studies E.8.3 – Describe the ways in which local, regional, and ethnic cultures may influence the everyday lives of people.

English Language Arts F.4.1 – Conduct research by identifying, locating, exploring, and effectively using multiple sources of information appropriate to the inquiry, including print, non-print, and electronic sources.

English Language Arts F.4.1 – Present the results of inquiry, reporting and commenting on the substance and process of learning, orally and in writing, using appropriate visual aids.

Goal: Students will see storytelling as an important way of teaching cultural traditions, values, and history in Native culture.

Objectives:

- 1) Students will be able to name three purposes of storytelling in Native culture.
- 2) Students will read two Native stories that relate information about nature, animals, and culture.
- 3) Students will name at least one story with which they are familiar that accomplishes a similar goal to those of Native stories.

Storytelling is a very important part of Native cultures. Native stories are a mixture of “legends and history, maps and poems, the teachings of spirit mentors, instructions for ceremony and ritual, observations of worlds, and storehouses of . . . knowledge [about the people and the earth.]” (PBS “Circle of Stories” website:

www.pbs.org/circleofstories/voices/index.html) Many Native stories talk about nature and show how Native peoples honor and connect with the earth. These stories talk about the plants and animals within specific tribes’ homelands – for example, many Woodlands Indians’ stories focus on the beaver. Some stories explain how and why certain animals and plants came to exist.

Other stories honor human ancestors, while still others explain ceremonies or rituals. Some stories teach the people about traditional ways of life, child rearing, friendship and

love, hunting routes, bird migrations, family lineage, etc. Stories can also be expressed in prayers, songs, and dances. Sometimes several songs are strung together to tell a story.

Among the most important stories are the creation stories. Every Native culture has a creation story. These stories “explain how life began on Earth and how a particular tribal nation came to be.” (PBS “Circle of Stories” website:

www.pbs.org/circleofstories/voices/index.html) Creation stories also taught the people how they fit into the circle of life and gave instruction about how to interact with other living things.

Read through the following list to learn more about the purposes of Native stories:

Native stories

- Describe how and why things are the way they are
- Explain how to conduct ceremonies
- Explain natural processes such as water cycles, inter-species relationships, life cycles of plants, earth movements, and soil types
- Give accounts of hunting, gathering, and farming to teach how to collect, prepare, and eat foods
- Describe historic and in-progress tribal migrations to find food or to make a holy journey
- Talk about the mystery and complexity of human life
- Tell of adventures in love, romance, and marriage

Read the following Menominee story (as told by the Menominee Culture Institute’s website.)

How the Porcupine Got His Quills

Long ago when the first porcupine was placed on the earth by the Great Spirit he had no quills. Porcupine was a gift to the Menominee Tribe and he was given a beautiful coat of fur.

Porcupine’s beauty made the other animals jealous. Every day the animals would come to Porcupine and tell him how much they wished their fur looked like his.

Now Porcupine knew he was beautiful but he didn’t pay any attention to the other animals. As time went by and every day he heard how wonderful he looked he decided to see for himself.

While Porcupine was taking his morning walk, he stopped by the stream to admire his fur.

Now the Great Spirit noticed Porcupine gazing at himself in the stream. The Great Spirit watched Porcupine for ten moons as he sat by the clear water admiring his own beauty.

The Great Spirit had a system of rewards and punishment for every creature. The Great Spirit knew that the time had come to punish Porcupine. The Great Spirit decided to take away Porcupine's beautiful fur and cover his body with ugly sharp quills.

Porcupine wears his coat of quills yet today. This is why he hides during the day and will only come out at night.

Students should answer the following questions individually or in pairs.

- 1) When the Great Spirit gave Porcupine to the Menominee people, what did he look like?
- 2) What led Porcupine to look at his reflection in the stream?
- 3) How did Porcupine react to seeing his reflection?
- 4) How long did Porcupine watch his reflection?
- 5) Why do you think the Great Spirit punished Porcupine?
- 6) How does this story teach about nature?
- 7) How does this story teach people how to behave?

Can you think about a story with which you are familiar that teaches: good behavior, why things in nature are the way they are, or how to interact with nature? Brainstorm as a class to come up with a list of stories that do this.

As a class, read *Old Meshikee and the Little Crabs* retold by Michael Spooner and Lolita Taylor (available in the OCHS Wisconsin Indians traveling trunk). The teacher should read the "source note" at the end of the story, which explains just what kind of information the story passes on to the reader. Have a think-aloud discussion in which the children suggest what the story was meant to teach. You may ask some guiding questions to help them through the process, since it is not as apparent as in the porcupine story.