Living Words: Oral tradition as text, record and evidence

NBE3U, Unit 4: Living Words, Lesson 1. 75 minutes. Teacher lesson plan.

Lesson at a glance

For thousands of years, First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples have kept their histories, laws and knowledge in spoken words: stories, speeches, songs and teachings passed carefully from one generation to the next. Canadian courts once dismissed these records as hearsay. In 1997, the Supreme Court of Canada said they must count.

What students do: Students sort ways of keeping knowledge (written, spoken, held in objects and land), learn the oral text forms named in the curriculum (reiterative storytelling, creation stories, acknowledgements, names), study the Delgamuukw case as a turning point for oral history as evidence, and begin a unit listening journal.

Curriculum expectations

Code	Students will…
B1.1	identify various text forms associated with the oral traditions of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit cultures; explain their purpose and symbolic meaning; and describe various customs governing their use
B1.3	explain, with increasing insight, the influence of a range of social, economic, and/or political forces on the disruption or continuation of oral traditions in contemporary First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities
B2.4	identify, in a variety of ways, important information and ideas in oral texts from and/or related to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit cultures, including increasingly complex or difficult texts

From The Ontario Curriculum, Grades 9 to 12: First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies (2019), English: Understanding Contemporary First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Voices, Grade 11, University Preparation (NBE3U). A = First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Perspectives and Text Forms in Canada, B = Oral Communication, C = Reading and Literature Studies, D = Writing, E = Media Studies.

Learning goals and success criteria

Learning goals	Success criteria
• We are learning what makes an oral tradition a text. • We are learning how Canadian law has treated oral history.	• I can name several oral text forms and explain their purpose. • I can explain how the Delgamuukw decision changed the status of oral history. • I can identify the most important ideas in a short account. • I can explain why “oral” does not mean “less reliable.”

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Materials and preparation

- **Slides:** Living Words deck.
- **Handouts:** Ways of Keeping Knowledge (page 1), Delgamuukw Case File (page 2).
- **Journal:** Listening journals (a notebook or document kept all unit).

Lesson sequence

Time (min)	Part	Teacher	Students	Look for
0–10	**Hook**	How do you know what you know?	Sort.	
10–25	**Oral text forms**	Purposes and meanings.	Note.	Forms named.
25–50	**Delgamuukw**	Case file.	Read and summarize.	Key ideas identified.
50–65	**Reliable?**	Evidence and memory.	Discuss.	
65–75	**Journal**	First entry.	Write.	

Differentiation

- **Support:** Case file with the key dates pre-filled.
- **ELL:** Glossary: evidence, hearsay, title, testimony, Elder.
- **Challenge:** Compare the trial judge's 1991 ruling with the 1997 decision using the Canadian Encyclopedia article.

Assessment

Type	Tool	Purpose
Assessment for learning	Delgamuukw Case File	Oral text forms (B1.1), social and political forces (B1.3) and important ideas (B2.4)

Living words: key points

- **Oral text forms:** Reiterative storytelling (repetition with variation keeps the teaching's spirit), creation stories (a spiritual foundation; humans and the natural world), acknowledgements (greetings recognizing family and clan), names (connecting person, community and spirit).
- **Customs:** Rules govern who tells, when, and to whom: by season, by the listener's age, by role (Elders, Métis Senators, Knowledge Keepers).
- **Delgamuukw:** Gitxsan and Wet'suwet'en chiefs claimed title to their lands; the 1991 trial ruling rejected their oral histories; the Supreme Court (December 11, 1997) said oral history must be given weight as evidence.
- **Why it matters:** A legal system built on paper had to make room for knowledge kept in speech, names and ceremony.

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- **Reliable?** Oral traditions use repetition, witnesses, designated keepers and protocols to protect accuracy.

Teacher notes

- Delgamuukw v. British Columbia: the Gitxsan and Wet'suwet'en hereditary chiefs filed in 1984; the trial began in 1987, and Elders testified using oral histories, often in their own languages. Chief Justice Allan McEachern ruled against them on March 8, 1991. The Supreme Court of Canada heard the appeal on June 16 and 17, 1997, and ruled on December 11, 1997, ordering a new trial and holding that oral histories must be treated as evidence alongside other kinds (The Canadian Encyclopedia, “Delgamuukw Case”).
- The oral text forms on the slides (reiterative storytelling, creation stories, acknowledgements, names) are the curriculum's own examples for B1.1. Discuss them in general terms; this unit never asks students to retell or perform anyone's story.
- Students learn about ceremonies, protocols and oral traditions; they do not imitate or perform them, and they do not retell community stories. Leave sacred knowledge to the people who hold it.
- Do not ask Indigenous students to speak for their communities, to share personal or family histories, or to act as experts. Every student's participation in sharing is optional.
- We strongly recommend reviewing this unit with your board's Indigenous education lead and, where possible, inviting a First Nations, Métis or Inuit Elder, Knowledge Keeper or guest speaker following your board's protocols (including offerings and honoraria). Local Nations' own sources come first.

Coming up

Lesson 2, How We Listen.

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