Belts That Speak: Wampum, memory and the spirit of an agreement

NBE3U, Unit 4: Living Words, Lesson 3. 75 minutes. Teacher lesson plan.

Lesson at a glance

A wampum belt is not a decoration. Woven from shell beads, it records an agreement and helps its keepers remember the words spoken when it was made. When the Two Row Wampum and the Dish With One Spoon are read only through European paper, much of their meaning is lost.

What students do: Students learn how wampum belts work as oral-and-material texts, read the symbols of the Two Row Wampum (Kaswentha) and the Dish With One Spoon, examine the debate over a written Dutch document said to date from 1613, and discuss what happens when print is privileged over oral records.

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
A2.5	describe a range of issues related to attempts to apply Western cultural criteria to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit text forms, including cultural text forms
B2.6	extend their understanding of oral texts from and/or related to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit cultures, including increasingly complex or difficult texts, by making effective connections between the ideas in them and in other texts and to their own knowledge, experience, and insights

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 how wampum belts carry meaning. • We are learning what is lost when Western criteria are applied to Indigenous text forms.	• I can explain the symbols of the Two Row Wampum and the Dish With One Spoon. • I can explain how belts and spoken words work together. • I can describe a problem with judging a belt only by a written document. • I can connect these agreements to today.

Materials and preparation

- **Slides:** Belts That Speak deck.

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- **Handouts:** Reading a Belt (page 1), Paper or Belt? (page 2).
- **Images:** Optional: teacher-chosen images of the belts from a Haudenosaunee or Anishinaabe source, or a museum that names the belt's community. Do not use replicas sold as souvenirs.

Lesson sequence

Time (min)	Part	Teacher	Students	Look for
0–10	**Hook**	What is a contract?	Discuss.	
10–30	**Two Row**	Read the belt.	Analyse.	Symbols explained.
30–42	**Dish With One Spoon**	Shared land.	Analyse.	
42–60	**Paper or belt?**	The 1613 debate.	Argue.	Issue described.
60–75	**Today**	Connections.	Write.	

Differentiation

- **Support:** Symbol cards with the meanings to match.
- **ELL:** Visual vocabulary: bead, row, canoe, ship, dish, spoon.
- **Challenge:** Read Robert Venables's analysis on the Onondaga Nation website and summarize it.

Assessment

Type	Tool	Purpose
Assessment for learning	Reading a Belt and Paper or Belt?	Oral text forms (B1.1), Western criteria (A2.5) and connections (B2.6)

Wampum: key points

- **How belts work:** Beads and patterns help keepers remember the words spoken at an agreement; the belt and the spoken record belong together.
- **Two Row:** Two purple rows: a canoe and a ship travelling side by side, neither steering the other. White rows: peace, friendship, respect.
- **Dish With One Spoon:** The dish is the shared land; one spoon means taking only what you need and leaving enough for others.
- **The 1613 debate:** Historians have questioned the written Dutch document; the Haudenosaunee record is the belt and its oral tradition.
- **Western criteria:** Treating paper as the only proof sidelines the Indigenous record, its keepers and its meaning.
- **Today:** Both agreements are cited in land acknowledgements and in discussions of treaty relationships.

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Teacher notes

- Two Row Wampum (Kaswentha): purple and white shell beads. Two purple rows represent a Haudenosaunee canoe and a European ship travelling side by side, each with its own laws, customs and beliefs; the white rows represent peace, friendship and respect. Onondaga Faithkeeper Oren Lyons has summarized it as an agreement in which each party stays in its own vessel (Indian Country Today, 2013). In 2013, the Two Row Wampum Renewal Campaign marked 400 years with a paddle down the Hudson River.
- The date 1613 comes from a written Dutch-language document (the “Tawagonshi Treaty”). In 1987, historians Charles Gehring, William Starna and William Fenton questioned its authenticity; Robert Venables (Onondaga Nation website, 2012) argues the text may be a later copy and that the belt itself is the Haudenosaunee record. Teach it as a live debate, and note that the Haudenosaunee keep the agreement in wampum and oral tradition regardless of the paper.
- Dish With One Spoon: an agreement among the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabeg (and others) about sharing the land and resources of the Great Lakes region; the dish is the land and the spoon is the people sharing it, taking only what they need and keeping the dish clean. It is referenced in many Ontario land acknowledgements (The Canadian Encyclopedia).
- Wampum belts are living, sometimes sacred, records held by their communities. Do not have students make imitation belts.
- 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.
- 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 4, Who Tells, When and to Whom.

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