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## Integrating Art and Literature Through Multicultural Studies: Focusing on Native American Sioux Culture.

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# Integrating Art and Literature Through Multicultural Studies: Focusing on Native American Sioux Culture

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The fourth-grade classroom brims with movement and noise. One group of students — Angel, Cheryl, Qwatwana, Lee P., Christy, and Paul — sit at a table formed by pushing desks together. The group brainstorms with the professor the title and content of their story about Iktomi the Trickster. They ultimately decide to call their story *Iktomi and the Blanket*. The story begins as Paul Goble suggests in his retelling of *Iktomi and the Boulder*, "Iktomi was walking along." By the end of the day, they have written a first draft of their story.

In other parts of the room, students weave sinew into a web for the center of the Dream Catcher, decorate wooden beads, and string the beads with shells and feathers to form the fringe for the sculpture. While they are working, the artist provides an explanation of symbolic meanings for each material used. These children, students in Marcia Kauffman's fourth-grade class, are using the media of art and

literature to understand a culture other than their own, to develop an appreciation for the art of that culture, and to refine their ability to read and write.

### **Integrating art and literature with cultural knowledge**

All teachers are interested in helping their students become more proficient learners. To reach this end, they teach a variety of instructional strategies; provide a wide range of materials; and establish a climate where learning styles are acknowledged, children are allowed to take risks, and writing and reading are encouraged. Yet, some of these students see the world through ethnocentric eyes; view art as creating pumpkins in October or hearts in February; and know isolated facts, but read and write below their ability levels. How can this happen? Perhaps the answer lies in the inability of teachers to capitalize upon a primary strength that students possess, their knowledge of themselves and their culture, and to fail to make connections between this understanding and new knowledge. By studying the art and literature of a culture, however, students will be able to build a bridge between knowledge of self and knowledge of others; see the arts as a living voice of cultures; and improve their ability to read and write.

### **Importance of culture to learning**

Brown (1963) defines culture as the accepted and patterned ways of behavior of a given people. It includes their language, value systems, socialization patterns, nonverbal systems, as well as the physical articles they make: clothing, shelter, tools, weapons, implements, and utensils. Gaining knowledge of one's own culture occurs through both formal and informal activities which allow a person to become a participant in the culture.

Knowledge of culture affects both how people view the world and how they assign meaning to what they learn. Research shows that this knowledge has a profound effect upon how well people understand what they read (Anderson and Barnitz, 1984; Erwin, 1993; Kintsch and Green, 1978; Rumelhart, 1980; Steffensen, Joag-Dev & Anderson, 1978). This complex set of learned responses enables persons to understand and respond to nuances of meaning. In a sense, it allows them to bring a part of themselves to the process. Knowledge of one's own culture can be viewed from a micro-perspective. It helps persons to know themselves better; it grounds them in the reality of who and what they are; and it affects how they gain knowledge of the world. Banks (1994) suggests that ethnic studies should first help people acquire an understanding of their own cultural heritage before moving to an understanding of cultural differences.

In contrast, knowledge of other cultures can be viewed from a macro-perspective. It allows persons to move from an understanding of self to an understanding of others. If students are allowed to celebrate cultural differences, encouraged to respect these differences, and provided opportunities to recognize all cultures' unique contributions, they can become tolerant and compassionate world citizens (Allen, 1986), and learn to thrive in a rapidly changing, diverse world (Banks, 1994). In her book, *Planning and Organizing for Multicultural Instruction* (1983), Gwendolyn Baker states that because people of the world are bound together, survival depends on how well they live together with understanding and respect. Whether to help students become worldly wise or to help them merely to survive, knowledge is at the heart of cultural understanding (Purves, Rogers and Soter, 1990). Scarcella (1990) suggests that an understanding of the culture of others can be gained by providing experiences which relate to a wide range of cultural groups.

## **Importance of art and literature in gaining cultural knowledge**

Because art is an integral part of every culture, it is difficult to teach important aspects of culture without teaching the art (Maquet, 1986). In many cultures art is so embedded in everyday life that there is no separate word for "art." In these cultures, no distinction is made between creating artistic and useful items. Yet in our society, anything practical or useful is not considered art (Embers, 1993). Visual symbols often have a strong meaning to a culture that cannot be conveyed by words alone. By approaching a culture through its visual and symbolic attributes, students gain understanding of non-verbal and value systems. Through the process of recreating some of the arts of a culture, students connect in a personal way with non-verbal feelings and values of others. As the tactile-kinesthetic approach to instruction has shown, when things learned become tangible, touchable, they are recalled (Hewitt, 1977). If given appropriate instructional opportunities, students may well carry within themselves forever the memory of the smell of the sage and the feel of the sinew.

Often a vitality is missing in the approaches used to teach about other cultures. Hamblen (1986) suggests that teachers incorporate the study of a people's art, containing basic life-sustaining activities which are themes in art expressions around the world, into cultural studies. Art mirrors how a culture reacts to fear, security, battle, beauty, or the gods. It teaches how a society marks the importance of meaning of individuals, activities, and environments. Particularly for children of this generation, everything moves at a rapid pace. The world often appears frantic, unconnected, constantly changing. Study of the arts is a vehicle for helping students see that there is a continuity of symbols, of themes, of needs that link cultures together through time. Learning

the crafts of a culture provides a tactile approach to the values that endure, are repeated, have continuing meaning, and have a place in daily lives. Anthropologists now tell us that despite the many differences, all cultures of the world share a number of common features called cultural universals. Each has developed solutions to the problems facing all human societies (Ferraro, Trevathan, and Levy, 1994).

Children's literature is also a powerful medium for understanding the world (Diakiw, 1990). The importance of literature in diversity education cannot be overemphasized (Allen, 1986). The view of the world presented in stories from other cultural groups contributes to a child's developing world view and provides a link to understanding. Norton and others (1981) indicate that attitudes toward other cultures can be improved if multicultural books and activities are integrated into the curriculum. Literature provides a connection to oral history, the method used by many cultures to transmit their value system from generation to generation.

Because both art and writing are visually dependent, can be viewed as alternative communication systems (Harste, Woodward, and Burke, 1984), and use the same critical thinking and decision-making brain power, there is a parallel to teaching children to draw and teaching them to read and write (Alejandro, 1994). Both art and literature help people free their imaginations, express their emotions and thoughts, and order their worlds (Purves, 1990).

The purpose of this article is to describe the development and teaching of an integrated thematic unit which provides opportunities for students to gain understanding of a culture other than their own and to apply this new knowledge through writing and art.

## Integrating art, literature, and culture in a fourth-grade classroom

In the summer of 1993, as part of a university- and community cultural council-sponsored summer program for fifth and sixth-grade youth, we began exploring the idea of writing a thematic unit about the Sioux. Our goal was to help students be a part of the unending circle described by Thom (1992) in his book *Becoming Brave*.

*In the Indian world, all aspects of a man's direction in life are passed from person to person and generation to generation through constant, detailed, oral history and repeated ritual. An unending circle (p. 3, pages unnumbered).*

Recognizing the difficulty of teaching about another culture, we chose to use art and literature as our interpreters — helping us to cross the cultural boundary to the study of the Sioux. These native speakers, the literature and the art, helped convey to the children a personal feeling for cultural diversity. The art medium we chose for the unit was the Dream Catcher. This symbolic sculpture exemplifies art's place in the lives of the Sioux people. It functions as a part of the child's cradleboard and symbolically provides a means of protecting the child from a night's bad dreams. The literature we used was Paul Goble's trickster tale of *Iktomi and the Boulder* (1988). To the Sioux, Iktomi is held responsible for all irrational and chaotic aspects of creation, such as floods and droughts (Goble, 1988).

The unit was designed to accomplish six major objectives. The students would have the opportunity to:

1. Develop an understanding and appreciation of the Native American culture of the Sioux Indians;

2. Secure an understanding of the structure, language, and content of Iktomi and the Boulder retold by Paul Goble;
3. Analyze the story and relate that knowledge of the book to their understanding of the culture;
4. Use the above information to create a piece of Native American art that mirrors the environment of the Plain Indians;
5. Create a trickster story in the style and form of the Iktomi tales;
6. Understand the difference between the Native American symbols and the thoughts for which they stand.

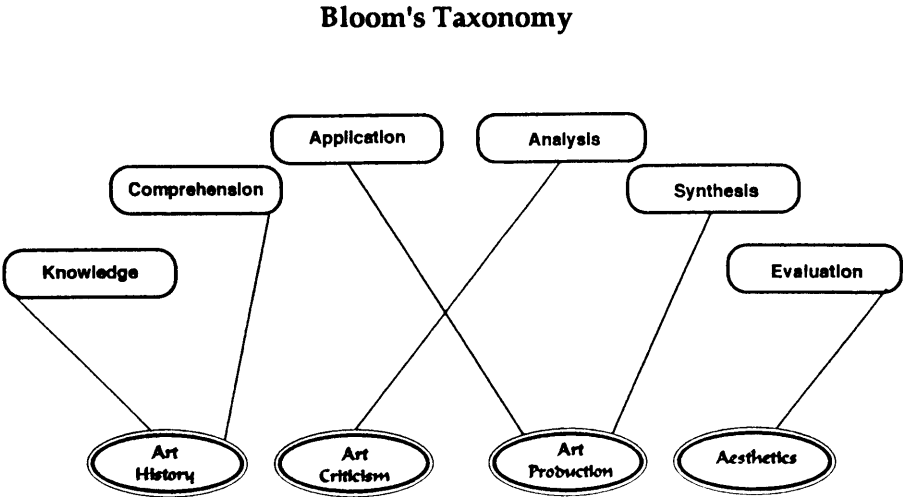
In planning the instructional sequence for the unit, we used both the criteria of Multicultural Discipline-based Art Education (Bongiorni, Cummings, and Fitzgerald, 1991), emphasizing four disciplines of art: art history, art criticism, art production, and aesthetics, and Bloom's Taxonomy of Cognitive Objectives. The instructional sequence incorporated visuals, explanation, and discussion to develop knowledge and comprehension of cultural content (art history), text structure, and author's style. These understandings were then applied to the making of the Dream Catcher (art production) and the writing of the story. This process of creating their own versions of Sioux art and literature also required the students to analyze the information (art criticism) about the Sioux culture and synthesize this new information with their understanding of their own culture. Again through class discussions, self evaluation (aesthetics) was encouraged.

After seeing the extraordinary writing and art these children produced in the summer, we taught the unit in Marcia Kauffman's fourth-grade classroom at O'Connor Elementary School in Victoria, Texas in March of 1994. O'Connor



Elementary serves 672 students in grades Pre-K through fifth. The changing campus demographics reflect a rapidly growing minority population. Testing on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills during the spring of 1993 showed that only 19% of that year's fourth-grade students were meeting minimum expectations. The activities from that experience are outlined.

**FIGURE 1**  
*Comparison of Bloom's Taxonomy to MDBAE*



**Multicultural Discipline-based Art Education**

Activity one. We began with a whole-group KWL activity. We asked the students what they already knew about the Sioux. Earlier in the year, they had read a story in their basal reader about the Plains Indians and knew that the Sioux lived in tepees and hunted buffalo. We asked them what they

wanted to know about the Sioux and they told us that they wanted to know about the people's everyday life.

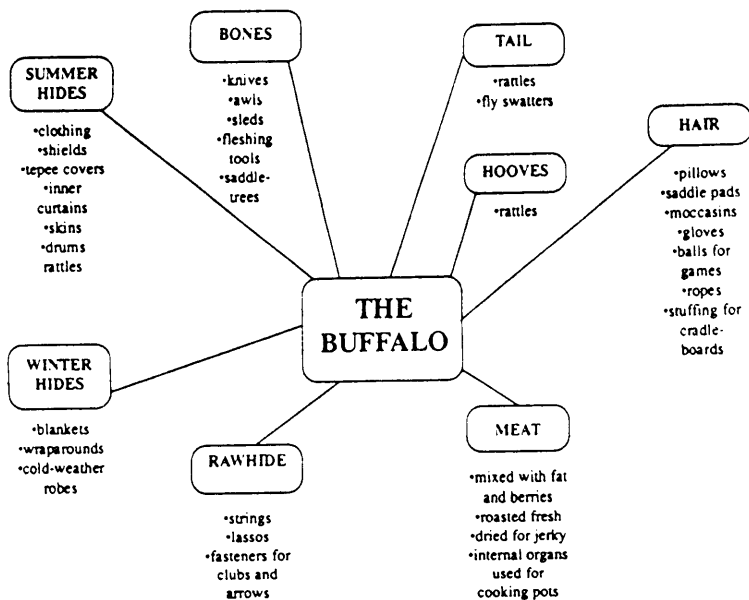
Activity two. After stating objective one (The students will develop an understanding and appreciation of the Native American culture of the Sioux Indians.), which provided an advanced organizer for a discussion of the culture, we discussed with the students eight critical concepts about the culture:

1. Plains Indian tribes including the Sioux moved to the grasslands from other areas between 1300 and 1800. With this move, their lives changed.
2. The Plains Indians were often referred to as People of the Horse.
3. The buffalo was important to the Sioux in many ways.
4. The tepee was an excellent structure for the Sioux.
5. Art was a bond of cultural unity throughout the grasslands, and is today an integral part of the Sioux culture.
6. The pipe is the most powerful symbol of the whole relationship of human beings to the earth and sky.
7. The warbonnet is a sign of leadership and derives much of its power from the legend of the Eagle.
8. For the Plains Indians, symbols are a part of nature, a part of themselves.

To facilitate the discussion, we showed and discussed colored transparencies related to each of the concepts. These transparencies provided the students with both symbolic and representational pictures of the Sioux and their culture. These transparencies includes a tribal map of the Plains;

buffalo hunt; painted horses and men; pictures of bags, pipes, men's and women's clothing (showing beadwork and quillwork); horses with travois; cradleboards; shields; painted teepees; warbonnets; and dances. In addition to the pictures, graphic organizers were shown and discussed: timeline of the coming of the horse; semantic map of the use of the buffalo; transparency of Native American symbols.

**FIGURE 2**  
*Uses of Buffalo*



Activity three. To facilitate recall of information from activity two, we reviewed these points with the students:

- Where the Sioux Indians lived and what type of life they led;
- The relationship of the Sioux to animals such as the buffalo and the horse;

- The tepee and how it was made and decorated;
- The Sioux dress, what they wore or carried — warbonnets, warshirts, beaded moccasins, tobacco bag and pipe — and how these items were made and decorated;
- The differences between ceremonial dress and everyday dress;
- The reverence the Sioux felt toward nature, and how they reflected this reverence in their art.

We prompted the students when necessary, and displayed a sample of earlier shown transparencies to reinforce learning.

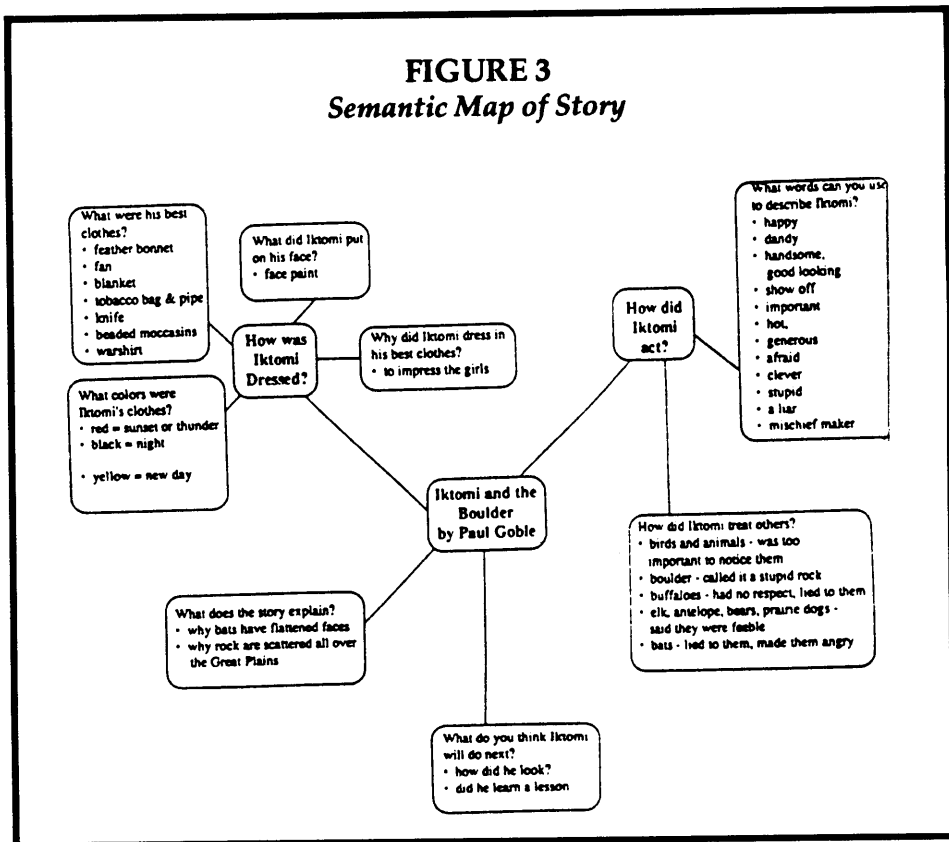
Activity four. We began this activity with a statement of objective two as an advanced organizer: (You will have the opportunity to secure an understanding of the structure, language, and content of the story of Iktomi and the Boulder by Paul Goble). We clarified for the students what structure and content meant, and explained that we wanted them to understand not only the story, but the way the author retold it.

Without showing the pictures, we read the story to the class. One of us read the basic story of Iktomi, while the other provided the sarcastic remarks that were attributed to the group listening to the storyteller. We asked the students to listen carefully to the story, because we would ask them questions about it later. We then asked the following questions and recorded the students answers on a blank semantic map:

1. How does the story begin?
2. How does Iktomi look? How does he act? What is his relationship to nature? What does he call the boulder and the animals? How do others treat Iktomi?

3. Why are there two parts to the story? Who is the reader/teller of the first part? Who is the reader/teller of part two?
4. How does the story end? Does it tell something that you did not know before? What is that message called?

**FIGURE 3**  
*Semantic Map of Story*



Using information provided by Paul Goble in the introduction to *Iktomi and the Boulder* (1988), we described Iktomi to the students.

1. Iktomi is a trickster character of the Great Plains, who is very clever, often has magical powers, and is a mischief-maker.

2. He is forever trying to get the better of others, but usually is fooled himself.
3. In older stories of the Plains Indians, the Creator entrusts Iktomi with much of Creation. He is credited with the mistakes of Creation such as earthquakes, floods, disease, etc.
4. There is no correct version of these stories, but the storyteller kept to certain familiar themes and wove variations around them.

The stories reflect the following characteristics:

- the stories had a moral, but no sermon;
- they were written in informal language;
- all began the same way, "Iktomi was walking along ...";
- they suggested from the start that Iktomi was idle, aimless, with nothing better to do (Goble, 1988).

Again using the semantic map, we asked the students to modify their earlier held ideas based upon this new information. We reread the story and asked the students to supply their own sarcastic remarks. This was difficult for them at first.

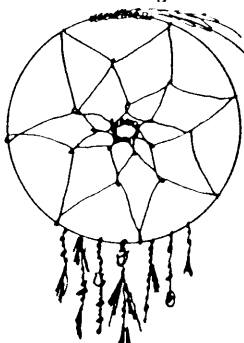
Activity five. We stated objective three for the students: (You will be able to analyze the story and relate that knowledge of the book to your understanding of the Sioux culture); showed transparencies of illustrations from the book (p. 4 — tepee, p. 6 — Iktomi in best clothes, p. 11 — Iktomi smoking a pipe, p. 31 — Iktomi and the boulder, p. 23 — the buffalo, p. 30 — bats breaking the boulder, p. 32 — Iktomi walking away); and helped the students relate the information provided in these illustrations to what they had learned about the Sioux.

The students were able to make the following inferences:

- Iktomi is a modern man because on page 4 there is a sign saying "Back Tomorrow." Early Sioux did not have a written language, they passed down information by telling stories. The tepee was painted with both pictures (man's art) and symbols (woman's art).
- Clothes like these are only worn for special ceremonies and are heavy and hot. Iktomi should not have worn the warbonnet. The eagle feathers are given for generosity or bravery. He is too young, and he does not seem like a brave man.
- The pipe must be important to Iktomi. When he is tired, he sits under the rock and smokes to give him strength.
- Doesn't Iktomi know that the rock is important (a spirit), when he tries to trick it? He is going to get into trouble.
- Iktomi uses the buffalo. He should be good to the buffalo because the buffalo gives him most things he needs.
- Iktomi uses the bats to break the boulder. He does not appreciate what they do for him. He thinks only of himself.
- Iktomi is a modern man. He is wearing a baseball cap and socks. He is still the same, he has not learned a lesson.

Activity six. After stating objective four: (You will use the information you have learned to create a piece of Native American art that mirrors the environment of the Plains Indians), we moved from the voice of literature to the voice of art. On this day we broke the class into two groups — one making the Dream Catcher and one writing group stories.

**FIGURE 4**  
*Dream Catcher Story and Symbols*



Legend of the Ojibway Dream Catcher

*It is believed by the "first men" people that dreams, both good and bad, descended from the dark night sky. One day, in an effort to protect her child from the night's bad dreams, an Ojibway woman, relying on the skill of spider people, constructed the dream catcher. Attached to her baby's cradleboard, the dream catcher captured the bad dreams in the web and held them there until they evaporated in the first rays of the morning sun. Good dreams simply slipped through the center hole in the web to the one sleeping beneath.*

Symbolism of Some of the Materials and Techniques Used in the Dream Catcher:

- Willow - tree of life
- Sage - youth, drives out evil spirits
- Pine needles - wealth, money, purification
- Rocks - Stone God - oldest spirit
- Fringe - to erase your trail
- Red - sunset, thunder, blood, earth
- Green - healing, fertility
- Numbers - Four - Directions: north, south, east, west
- Seven - seven council fires of Sioux Nation
- Eagle feathers - bravery, generosity
- Other feathers - homage to birds - used in Sacred Medicine Bag
- Own feather - ghost
- Circle - unending circle of life and nature
- Rosemary - healing, love, protection
- Fur - homage to the animal powers - used in Sacred Medicine Bag
- Shells - increase strength
- Black - victory, night
- White - glare of sun at zenith, snow
- Orange - strength, attraction



For the first group (approximately two-thirds of the class), we told the story of the Chippewas or Ojibway Dream Catcher and explained much about the symbolism of each natural material that would be woven into it.

At this point the feathers, beads, leather, fur, and sinew were carefully arranged in baskets and on rugs. By the time the Dream Catcher was well under way, there were beads under the table, feathers in the boys' hair and fur on their shoulders. They also were wearing the rugs. We asked for two or three students who liked to sew or were patient to weave the web.

Other students painted beads, clipped feathers and strung shells on sinew for the fringe that would later be hung from the willow hoop. As they worked with natural materials, they began to see how different it is to attach anything without a glue gun or Magic tape. All feathers and fur need to be tied, strung or notched. The fresh herbs and grasses smelled wonderful wrapped into bundles and made the classroom smell as fragrant as the Plains. We talked as we wove about the symbolism of the materials, urging the children to be careful and finish their work in a beautiful and neat manner. We tried to instill in them the knowledge that the real beauty of this sculpture is in the ideas, materials, and decoration each group brings to its own creation. We rotated groups during the day so all children had time with each activity.

Activity seven. At the same time, the other third of the class began work on its own Iktomi story. The activity began as before with a restatement of an objective: (You will also create a trickster story in the style and form of the Iktomi tales). To do this, we asked the group to brainstorm a title for the story and write the first draft which consisted of only

Iktomi's adventure. For this activity, we served as scribe, taking down the dictation and retyping the draft to be edited the next day. This group rotated and we repeated the process described.

The next day, we distributed clean typed copies of each group's first draft story. Then we asked each group to read its story and make changes in the content itself. Again we served as scribe. After this process was completed, each group added its own sarcastic comments to the story. This step was especially enjoyable for the fourth-graders once they knew that they were not going to get into trouble for saying such things in class. Finally, each group added the moral to its story. The groups then checked the stories for errors. At the beginning of the last day, we passed out books containing all three of the stories to each student in the class.

### **Assessment of student learning**

To evaluate the students' understanding of the information provided in the unit, the following activities were completed.

Developing an understanding of another culture. On the last day, we finished the "L" portion of the KWL Chart we began on the first day. In doing so, we found that the students learned that within the Sioux tribe, women and men approach art in different ways. Women make the tepees, but men paint the symbols on them. Men paint pictures of animals and objects while women paint geometric shapes which stand for objects and ideas. Women make the pipe stems, yet men carve designs on the bowl. They remembered that pictographs tell stories. The students also learned at least two characteristics of Iktomi "trickster" stories. They remembered that all of the Iktomi stories start alike, and that the stories have a moral to explain why some things happen. In terms of

the everyday life of the Sioux, they remembered that women take care of babies and carry them in a cradleboard, and that the Dream Catcher is powerful and keeps bad dreams from the child. They also knew that the Sioux view life as a circle like the hoop of the Dream Catcher.

Appreciating art of another culture. The evaluation of Objective Six (Understanding the difference between the Native American symbols and the thoughts for which they stand) was accomplished subjectively. By observing the children's behavior, we found that they applied their understanding of the art in many ways. Little Spider designs (Love Charms) began to appear on book covers and notes passed to best friends; boys clipped feathers for bravery; and girls wove fur and shells in their hair. As we played tapes of Sioux flute music throughout the unit, we noticed that the students would consistently restart a finished tape.

While the children came to understand something about universal meaning of symbols, they got somewhat carried away trying to use all the beads, shells, and feathers, making necklaces for everyone and surreptitiously taping feathers together when frustrated with wrapping and tying. It was frustrating to several of the children not to make a Dream Catcher to take home and hang over their own beds. It became evident by their discussion and behavior, that art can sometimes communicate meaning by transcending time, culture and traditional symbol systems (Bongiorni, Cummings, and Fitzgerald, 1991). They knew that Native American art was made by the hands of the people. This idea of originality of concept, creativity of design, and joy of craftsmanship appealed directly to them. We found that creating the Dream Catcher and Iktomi stories became an act of homage for these children who were inspired by another culture's works.

We found that each of the groups wrote a trickster story which began in the traditional fashion with "Iktomi is walking along ...;" used informal language; provided an appropriate moral; and developed secondary characters (bats, buffalo, eagles, horses, cheetah, ants) which were suitable for this type of writing. While all three groups saw Iktomi as a liar, only two of the groups depicted the protagonist as a trickster. In one story he was pictured as a weak, ineffective, afraid victim. In all three stories he survived in the end; although in one story he was not aware that people were laughing at him. Students in two of the groups seemed to enjoy very much writing the sarcastic remarks for the audience. The third group produced a story that was weak in several aspects. This group used sarcasm sparingly, developed a primary character without many of Iktomi's traits (except lying), and failed to provide a coherent plot sequence. While the stories written by the three groups varied, knowledge of the Sioux culture was apparent in all three stories. The following examples from the three stories reflect the students' understanding of Native American reverence for nature:

- Story I:       The rabbit called Iktomi "Older Brother" and Iktomi called the rabbit "Little Friend." The eagle picked up Iktomi and carried him away from harm.
- Story II:       Iktomi called the buffalo and bats "Little Brother." The horse rescued Iktomi from under the rock.
- Story III:      Iktomi called the magic blanket "Brother Blanket" and the blanket saved him from the ants.

The concept of magic powers was also present in all three stories:

- Story I: Iktomi met a magical, ugly, black rabbit who later turned into a cheetah.
- Story II: The rock was angry because Iktomi called him names.
- Story III: Iktomi's blanket came alive and saved him from the ants.

If time had permitted, we would have asked the groups to develop further their understandings by providing opportunities for them to share their stories with the others, keep a notebook of vocabulary words, pictures, and symbols; draw cover illustrations for the stories, create personal amulets with their own private message inside, discuss the concept of Folk Art and choose other cultures they might study in a similar way.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this article was two-fold. First, we described the development and teaching of an integrated thematic unit about the Native American culture of the Sioux. Because none of the children in the class were Native American, this unit exposed the students to a culture other than their own. It showed the students in a tangible way how the Sioux lived and what they believed. The unit was structured to reflect the levels of Bloom's Taxonomy of Cognitive Objectives as well as the elements of Multicultural Discipline-based Art Education.

The second purpose was to show how the students applied this new knowledge by creating art and literature appropriate for the culture. The art and literature chosen were the Dream Catcher and the Iktomi story. Because we, the teachers and the students, were not Native American, these two media became our native speakers, the informers for the culture. Because we allowed the voices of the literature and the art to

speak for us, we were able to build bridges between the Sioux culture and our own. It is our feeling that these voices infused the experiences with a spark, a life, that no textbook could contain. They assisted us in crossing boundaries and conveyed to us, teacher and student alike, a personal feeling for their culture. This article reflects a strong belief in the words of Ernest Boyer (1985),

*We feel that now, more than ever, all students need to see clearly, to hear acutely and feel sensitively. The language of the arts is no longer simply desirable, but is essential if we are to convey adequately our deepest feelings and survive with civility and joy.*

It is a message that all children should be allowed to hear and taught to follow.

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