



Essential Question for this lesson:

How do Iktomi stories teach people about thinking critically?

The Oscar Howe Project at the Performing Arts Center of Rapid City houses and preserves two original paintings by Oscar Howe, the important Yanktonai Dakota artist. Howe expresses and illuminates his Dakota culture through his art.

One of the paintings exhibited at the Performing Arts Center of Rapid City is called “Iktomi” (eek-dó-mee). This piece of art is a watercolor painting on paper, created in 1959 by Oscar Howe. The painting shows the sacred being Iktomi, known as a spider-trickster, suspended in a “web” of pink lines. Sometimes Iktomi appears as a spider, and sometimes he appears as a man.

Iktomi continually plots to make people look foolish by tricking them and causing others to laugh at their folly. People are warned about Iktomi’s tricks and cautioned against listening to him. Because of his desire to create trouble for others, he is friendless. Iktomi tries to make himself feel better by bringing others down, but in many Iktomi stories, he ends up hurt or being laughed at himself. In this way, stories about Iktomi teach us to behave honorably and help us avoid trouble by thinking critically about situations. Iktomi is always teaching us about the consequences of our actions.

How do people learn to think about consequences? Sometimes stories teach people how to think clearly about what is happening in order to avoid being tricked. Here is a Lakota story that has been used for hundreds of years to teach children and adults how to think critically about situations. In it, Iktomi tricks some pheasants. This part of the story reminds readers to be wary of people who may be trying to trick them, for it is the responsibility of each individual to think critically and avoid negative consequences.

In addition, this story provides a lesson for people about the consequences of tricking others for personal gain. Iktomi is friendless because he is selfish, and others are repelled by his selfishness. Iktomi thinks he gets away with tricking the pheasants, but negative consequences await him. In fact, multiple problems arise for Iktomi, who ends up looking like a fool. Because Iktomi both tricks and is tricked, people learn the negative consequences that befall tricksters and their victims.

Ella Deloria, a brilliant Dakota ethnographer, studied Lakota stories and carefully wrote down what Lakota elders said. She checked the stories with many elders so her book, Dakota Texts, would be a primary source text that preserves Ojibwe culture for hundreds more years to come.



Iktomi Tricks the Pheasants

Iktomi was walking at random along a creek and he heard dancing, so he stopped to listen. He finally located the source of the sound; so he went towards it and stood within sight of the place; and saw that those were all pheasants who were dancing and having a jolly time. Immediately he withdrew into the wood and wrapped some red grass about a piece of wood; this he put on his back, and then walked past without paying the slightest attention to the dancers. "Hey, there goes Ikto. Let's call him over," they said. "Ikto!" they called but he continued as if he hadn't heard; so they called repeatedly until he stopped; and then they asked, "What's that you carry on your back?" "These? Why they are just some silly little songs. There is to be a dance farther up, and I've been sent for. That's why I am in a rush; now what are they after?" he added. "O, elder brother, come over here and sing us one tiny little song; just one," they said and again he said, "Indeed not! I've just told you I'm in a hurry. What's the idea?" and he walked on. But they were very insistent, so he relented. "Very well, then," he said, undoing his package and bringing out a single song. "Now, this song has its special regulation; will you heed it?" "Surely," they said. "All right, then. While I am singing it, nobody is to open his eyes," Ikto told them; and they said that would be all right with them. So he got out his drum and began beating it as he sang; so the birds danced, making a rhythmic noise with their feet. It was a good sight to watch them dancing; females included. This is what he said,

"Dance with your eyes closed.
Whoever opens his eye shall get a sty.
Dance with your eyes closed."

They danced with their eyes closed and meantime Ikto was selecting those with the fattest breasts, and killing them in turn. One happened to look, after a while, and seeing many dead, called out, "Fly for your lives! Ikto will kill you all off!" and with that, he flew out of the place; so the rest followed him. Iktomi laughed as he picked up his prey, and, tying the birds into a bunch, he said to himself, "On those rare times when I am faring poorly, that's the trick I work!" and he began looking for a pleasant spot; yonder in the woods was a lovely place where the grass was soft and thick; he built a fire there. Then he set some of the pheasants up on spits to cook, and some he covered with ashes to roast; but while he sat there waiting, two trees in contact overhead kept making a loud squeaking noise each time there was a gust of wind. So he called up, "Little brothers, please don't do that. Why, you will injure each other that way!" But the noise persisted. At last Ikto climbed up one of the trees, planning to hold the two apart, but just when he had his hand between the trees there was a calm, and he couldn't pull his hand out. "Little



brothers, little brothers, let me go, please. I am cooking something in ashes and I need to go and attend to it." But his hand continued to be pinned there. At that moment, a wolf was going by, in the distance, on his own business; and Ikto called to him, "Hey! I, a chieftain, am cooking meat on spits here. Get out; I won't have you eating it up for me!" "The idiot might just happen to be talking sense," the wolf thought; so he turned and came over to find out; there, sure enough, was some meat on spits, just about done, so he sat down and ate it all up and then started to go. From overhead Ikto called again, "At least I hope you have left for me what is cooking in the ashes," he said; so again the wolf thought he might just be talking sense and came back to the fire; and sure enough, there were some birds cooking in the ashes. So he brushed them off, and took them and feasted again. He finished and was going off when at last the wind came up again and the trees separated so that Ikto took his hand away and came down, only to find all his food gone.

Thus it happened that he didn't eat after all; and he was going away very hungry; when, as he walked along, he came upon the wolf who had taken all his cooking. He was lying dead directly in his path, so Ikto stopped to scold at the dead animal. "There you are; and that's just what you get. Everybody dies like this who tries to pull something on me!" With that, he lifted the wolf to his shoulder and walked along with him. Puzzling as to the best way to handle that body, he walked till he found another pleasant spot in the wood. There he built a fire and sat beside it to think. "I believe I will use at least a piece of this hide as a head-kerchief; and some of it I shall use for a blanket-robe; a piece will make me some leggings, and—aw shucks, what shall I do with it anyway?" he was saying, and at last he took it in his arms impatiently and said, "It has been done; even very fine things are sometimes discarded!" So he hurled the body into the fire. Now, the wolf wasn't really dead, it appeared, for he sprang up, scattering live coals about, and ran away; so that Ikto was himself so frightened that he repeatedly grasped and let go of himself. From there who knows whither Ikto went? That is all. ¹

- from Dakota Texts by Ella Deloria

¹ Deloria, Ella. *Dakota Texts*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006. 19-25.



Thinking About the Iktomi Story

Please write your thoughts about the questions below. We are looking for your **original thinking**: what actually comes into your mind as you carefully read the questions. Your answers may be clear bullet points or clear, complete sentences.

1. How does Iktomi trick the pheasants in the story? Please show 2 steps from his trick.

2. Write your ideas about **why** Iktomi tricks the animals in the story. Please use examples from the story to support your thinking.

3. Why do you think it is wrong to trick others? Please give reasons to support your thinking.

4. Why do you think Iktomi gets away to some unknown location at the end of the story?

5. Please name at least 3 examples of negative consequences you notice Iktomi receiving in the story.



Notes for Teachers

The lessons connected with *The Oscar Howe Project* are designed to be used with students in several grade levels. You may need to provide scaffolding in order to help your students access the text. To help with this, we have included this vocabulary bank. This bank can be easily used with the existing word study procedures you use with students.

- Yanktonai Dakota
- exhibited
- Iktomi
- sacred being
- continually
- folly
- cautioned
- thinking critically
- consequences
- Lakota
- elders
- source
- immediately

- withdrew
- elder brother
- insistent
- regulation
- rhythmic
- stye
- yonder
- persisted
- attend to
- chieftain
- scold
- discarded
- whither

CCSS Language Arts Anchor Standards Addressed:

- R1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
- R10: Read and comprehend complex informational texts independently and proficiently.
- W9: Draw evidence from informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.
- SL1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
- L4: Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases by using context clues, analyzing meaningful word parts, and consulting reference materials as appropriate.
- L6: Acquire and use accurately a range of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the college and career-readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge.

South Dakota Oceti Sakowin Essential Understandings and Standards Addressed:

- EU 4.2: Analyze Oceti Sakowin social etiquette, proper behavior, and values.
- EU 5.1: Analyze Oceti Sakowin culture through oral tradition and unbiased information.

Note: Deloria's scholarly work and her stature in the American scientific community underpin [Dakota Texts](#) and lend to it the highest credibility. Both her extensive fieldwork and her personal cultural experience show that this volume contains unbiased information; it is a well-researched and highly respected scientific text.



More Notes on the Standards and Student Work

The South Dakota Department of Education adopted the Oceti Sakowin Essential Understandings and Standards in 2011. The document is available on the SD DOE website under "Oceti Sakowin Project." All South Dakota teachers should be employing these standards across the curriculum. These standards represent essential learning for all South Dakotans.

We have included here the reference numbers and a basic description of each Oceti Sakowin Essential Understanding and Standard that this lesson addresses. For full articulations of all of these cultural standards, please consult the official state document: <http://indianeducation.sd.gov/documents/OcetiSakowinEUS.pdf>

While this lesson was built for students in grades 6-12, teachers will provide different levels of scaffolding for their students. We would rightly expect the thinking of older students to be deeper and their examples from the text to be more specific. This lesson has been field tested with students in grades 6-12 in South Dakota with success. Below are suggested performance level descriptors that show three levels of performance. Over time, students show growth in inferential thinking and in using textual evidence to support their thinking.

The text of this article and the accompanying critical thinking questions are considered informational texts. The first part of the reading is a real-world text about a current local project; the excerpt from Dakota Texts is an ethnographic text. The questions are designed to elicit high-level thinking and need no answer key. If students are showing their original thinking, engaging with the topic and the ways in which they perceive the project, then they are doing good work.

Teachers will have success when they encourage students to show and explain their thinking. Great student discussions can follow! The next page contains a graphic organizer that can help thinkers prepare for their discussions. This process of preparing for and engaging in peer discussions addresses the CCSS Speaking and Listening Standard SL.1!

Performance Level Descriptors (two learning targets from CCSS R1):

R1: I can make logical inferences from a text.

3	2	1
Students can combine their own background knowledge with specific text clues in order to make inferences. They can show their thinking in writing.	Students can combine background knowledge with text clues to make inferences, but the inference may be faulty *or* they cannot show how they arrived at their inference in writing.	Students cannot yet combine background knowledge with text clues to make an inference about a text. They may be lacking background knowledge *or* they may not be able to understand the text they are reading.

R1: I can use evidence to support my conclusions about a text.

3	2	1
Students can identify 2 specific text clues that support the conclusions they make about a text. They can show in writing how the text clues led them to their conclusion.	Students can identify 1 text clue that supports the conclusions they make about a text, but they cannot show how the text clues led them to their conclusions. They may have formed a conclusion that reveals a misreading of the text.	Students cannot yet identify any text clues that support the conclusions they make about a text. They cannot explain clearly how they arrived at their conclusions. Their conclusions may reveal a misreading of the text.



Discussion: What makes a trick malicious?

Malicious means “intending to do harm,” so a malicious act is a bad one. It means someone planned to do harm to another person. Sometimes friends play tricks on each other for fun, and sometimes people play malicious tricks. How can we tell the difference?

1. Write down an example of a malicious trick in this box.

2. In this box, write down an example of a trick between friends that is not malicious.

3. Finally, in this box, write down a trick that might start out harmless but ends up hurting somebody.

4. Is the trick you wrote down in box number 3 malicious? Please explain your answer.

Name _____ Date of discussion _____