



Essential Question for this lesson:

In what ways are Thunder Dreamers, or *Heyokas*, both teachers and entertainers?

The Performing Arts Center of Rapid City houses and preserves two original paintings created by Oscar Howe, the brilliant twentieth-century Yanktonai Dakota artist. One of these paintings is called *Heyoka Dancer* (hay-yó-ka). This 1965 artwork is a painting made of casein on paper. Casein is a paint made with pigment and milk proteins, used for thousands of years. In *Heyoka Dancer*, Oscar Howe is expressing and illuminating his Oceti Sakowin culture.

In South Dakota and beyond, *Oceti Sakowin* (Oh-chay-tea Shaw-ko-ween) culture is significant and enriching. *Oceti Sakowin* means “the people of the Seven Council Fires.” This includes Lakota, Dakota, and Nakota people. As an *Oceti Sakowin* artist, Oscar Howe made a point of teaching people about his culture through his art. He wrote, “That Indian historical forms preserved visually through paintings, thereby documenting them, is in a sense teaching history through art has been part of my philosophy and esthetics.”¹ Clearly, Howe intended his artwork to be both expressive and instructive; his painting *Heyoka Dancer* is both.

The *Heyoka dancer* is connected to *Wakinyan* (wah-kéen_g-yan_g), or Thunder. *Wakinyan* has two aspects: one side of him is fierce and destructive, while the other side is *Heyoka*, a laughter-loving clown.² *Heyoka* dancers deliberately behave in contrary ways: they pretend to be shivering in the hot sun or say “you’re welcome” instead of “thank you.” Their contrary, even extreme behavior certainly makes people laugh, but it has a serious purpose. *Wakinyan* is honored most by actions and words that are the direct opposite of the person’s intent, so *Heyoka* dancers are paying homage to *Wakinyan* with their purposeful clowning.³

Heyoka dancers are also teachers, for they make people think about their own actions and intentions. People observing *Heyoka* dancers are thinking about the real intention behind the opposite behavior: the “thank you” behind the “you’re welcome.” This makes people consider whether their own actions correctly reflect their intentions, and even whether those intentions are worthy. In this way, *Heyoka* dancers are teaching people to be mindful of their actions and respectful of *Wakinyan*.

In his 1933 book *Land of the Spotted Eagle*, *Oceti Sakowin* author Luther Standing Bear writes about *Heyokas*, or Thunder Dreamers. Standing Bear, a Lakota man, had observed Thunder Dreamers his entire life, so

¹ Howe, Oscar. “White Buffalo Dancer.” *Oscar Howe, Artist*. Vermillion: University of South Dakota Press, 2004.

² Dooling, D. M., ed. *The Sons of the Wind: The Sacred Stories of the Lakota*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2000, xvi-xvii.

³ *Ibid*, 40.



his writing is a primary source text: it is extremely credible. Using primary source texts from Oceti Sakowin sources helps people get unbiased information about this important culture. Luther Standing Bear writes:

“The Thunder Dreamers were the *heyokas*, or clowns. They painted zigzag stripes on their bodies to simulate lightning, and (on their) arrows and war horses, and were, unlike most medicine-men, excellent warriors, many times using their powers to bring on a storm that would place their enemies at a disadvantage... Besides their serious business, which they carried on with the help of the sky powers, the Thunder Dreamers furnished fun and amusement at the various gatherings and festivities....

Much of the fun created by the fun-makers was by doing things opposite to the usual way; for instance, going into the tipi by crawling under instead of walking in by the door, or by coming out feet first. Now and then a Thunder Dreamer carried on his joking all the time, and one of these fellows was Break Shells....

Break Shells’ sister once made for him a fine pair of moccasins with a great deal of quillwork on them; finishing them, she threw them to him across the tipi, saying, “Ohan,” or “wear them,” as he full well knew; but since the word *ohan* means “to cook” as well as “to wear,” Break Shells promptly threw one of the moccasins into the kettle of boiling soup. The sister was so disgusted that she walked out of the tipi without a word.

It was customary with the Lakotas to remove one moccasin and with the bare foot hop across a stream that was too wide to jump across, but one day when Break Shells came to a stream he took off his moccasin, held up his bare foot, and hopped across with his shod foot. Everyone, of course, laughed.”⁴

Reading an excerpt of this primary source from Luther Standing Bear gives us more information about Heyokas. If we think about it, we realize that Oscar Howe’s painting is also a primary source about Heyokas! We know more because we have here two credible sources giving us information about this facet of Oceti Sakowin culture. We can look to other Oceti Sakowin people—artists, authors, and elders—to find out even more.

On the next page, you will share your own original thinking about Heyokas, art, and culture. People want to know what you think about these subjects. When you share your thinking, just as Oscar Howe and Luther Standing Bear have, you are helping yourself and others learn.

⁴ Standing Bear, Luther. Land of the Spotted Eagle. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006, 209-210.



Thinking About the Project

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. This text shows examples of Heyokas using humor in their work. Please show at least two pieces of evidence from the text you found to support the idea that Heyokas use humor.

» _____

» _____

2. Please explain why you think both Oscar Howe's painting *Heyoka Dancer* and Luther Standing Bear's excerpt about Heyokas are primary sources about Oceti Sakowin culture.

3. Please write at least two examples you find in the text showing that Heyokas have a serious purpose in Oceti Sakowin culture. Please use specific examples from the text to support your conclusions.

4. In what ways might we help ourselves and others use humor while learning something new?



Notes for Teachers

The lessons connected with *The Oscar Howe Project* at the Performing Arts Center of Rapid City 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.

- preserves
- brilliant
- Yanktonai Dakota
- casein
- expressing
- illuminating
- Oceti Sakowin
- significant
- enriching
- historical forms
- documenting
- philosophy
- esthetics
- instructive
- Wakinyan
- aspects
- fierce
- deliberately
- contrary
- intent
- homage
- purposeful
- intentions
- consider

- observing
- worthy
- mindful
- Thunder Dreamers
- observed
- primary source text
- credible
- sources
- unbiased information
- simulate
- disadvantage
- furnished
- amusement
- festivities
- quillwork
- *ohan*
- promptly
- kettle
- disgusted
- customary
- shod
- excerpt
- facet
- elders

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 and literary texts independently and proficiently.

W9: Draw evidence from informational and literary texts to support analysis, reflection, & 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 & persuasively.

L4: Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown & multiple-meaning words & phrases by using context clues, analyzing meaningful word parts, & consulting reference materials as appropriate.



L6: Acquire & use accurately a range of general academic & domain-specific words & phrases sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, & listening at the college & career-readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge.

South Dakota Oceti Sakowin Essential Understandings & Standards Addressed:

EU 1.2: Analyze interrelationships of Oceti Sakowin people, places, and the environment as they relate to reservations in SD. (Show that Howe was Yanktonai Dakota and Standing Bear was Lakota: both provide us with primary source texts and unbiased information.)

EU 3.1: Evaluate the different forms of Lakota, Dakota, and Nakota language dialects.

EU 4.2: Analyze Oceti Sakowin social etiquette, proper behavior, and values.

EU 5.1: Analyze Oceti Sakowin culture through oral tradition, written accounts, and unbiased information.

Note: Oscar Howe's scholarly work and his stature in the American fine art community underpin his artwork and lend to it the highest credibility. His extensive personal cultural experience render his artworks primary sources and unbiased information.

The text excerpted here is from a primary source document; Luther Standing Bear's book is an account of his own experiences living on the Great Plains before and during the reservation era. Standing Bear's written account of his boyhood training, cultural practices, and family life is unbiased information.

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 South Dakota Department of Education website under "Oceti Sakowin Project." All South Dakota teachers should be employing these standards across all content areas. 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>

The text of this article and the accompanying critical thinking questions are considered informational texts. They are real-world texts about a current local project. 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.

This lesson has been field tested with South Dakota students in grades 6-12 with success. Younger thinkers will need more time and support with the lesson. 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.

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.

Teachers will have success when they encourage their 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 & engaging in peer discussions addresses the CCSS Speaking and Listening Standard SL.1!



Discussion: Why might people learn better when they are having fun?

In this box, write about a time when you were learning a specific skill and having fun learning it.

Why do you think using fun and humor might help people learn faster?

What do you think people could do to add elements of fun to learning situations?

Name:

Date of discussion: