

Powwow Traditions and Ecological Movement

Grades 7-12

Knowledge Holder

This lesson was created by Ace Samuels (Cheyenne and Arapaho, Choctaw).



Materials

- Audio Equipment/Media Player
- Selected Powwow Audio Tracks
- Visual Media Examples
- Open Floor Space

Standards

This lesson aligns with national Performing Arts, Social Studies, and History frameworks by:

- Exploring how traditional dance styles act as living expressions of Tribal sovereignty and cultural resilience.
- Analyzing how our dance movements mirror the behaviors of the plants and animals we share this land with.
- Investigating how powwow gatherings foster communal healing and pass down vital protocols for protecting the earth.

Objective

The goal of this lesson is to provide stories and ways of dance, particularly in the Powwow arena. Our people dance from newborns (tinytots) all the way up to old age (golden age). Each style of dance has a creation story and is required to be understood and known before dancing in the arena. Through this lesson, we will see how traditional dance styles connect our bodies directly to the behaviors of our animal and plant relatives, serving as a powerful act of cultural survival and environmental awareness.

Survivance Message

Dance has always been part of Native culture and ceremony since the beginning of time. Colonization has had great impacts on dance in our societies and communities, but we are still here to practice and celebrate our dances as Native people in modern times. We have lost much of our old traditions through forced relocations and the creation of our reservations.

- Tribes across Turtle Island practice and host powwow events. While powwows are open to the public, they remain sacred spaces. We ask that all visitors approach these dances with deep respect as many dancers carry sacred eagle feathers and perform dances that are meant for prayer and community healing.
- The songs, depending on Northern or Southern style, will be sung based on the host Tribe, such as honor songs and flag songs. These dances include Men's Southern Straight, Women's Traditional Cloth, Men's Northern Traditional, Women's Buckskin, Grass, Woodland, Women's Fancy Shawl, Men's Fancy, Jingle Dress, Men's chicken, intertribal, round dances, buffalo dance, and various other dances that bring people together who may not have regalia to dance in a particular category.
- It is vital to actively challenge settler-colonial myths that falsely mischaracterize powwows as dark spiritualism, uniform theatrical performances, or spaces where alcohol is permitted. The powwow arena is a highly diverse social space where distinct dance styles carry deep protocols of community healing and living history.
- Our dances are an act of resistance because they were once outlawed. While some people may view these dances as just "performances," but for us, every step is a statement. We dance to show the world that we are still here, we are thriving, and our traditions are not just relics of the past, they are how we live right now. Many dancers carry this responsibility with them, dancing for those who are too sick, unable to move, or unable to speak for themselves.



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Braiding Knowledge: Curriculum Standards

This lesson is part of a broader framework that weaves together the Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS) and Indigenous Traditional Ecological Knowledge (ITECK). We teach Western science through a localized, relational lens to honor the history and sovereignty of the land and its caretakers. For a detailed breakdown of how this lesson aligns with specific NGSS benchmarks, ITECK guidelines, and UNESCO climate action goals, please visit our [story map](#).

Vocabulary

Men's Southern Straight, Women's Traditional Cloth, Men's Northern Traditional, Women's Buckskin, Grass, Woodland, Women's Fancy Shawl, Men's Fancy, Jingle Dress, Men's chicken, powwow, reservations, relationality

Resources

[WeRNative](#)

[Pow-wow dancing styles and meanings](#)

[Best of Jingle Dancing - Gathering of Nations Pow Wow](#)

[Men's Northern Traditional - 2022 Gathering of Nations](#)

[Introduction to Men's Eastern Woodland Dance](#)

[Powwow 101 - Chicken Dance](#)

[Pow Wow 101 - Grass Dance](#)

[Women's Northern Buckskin - 2022 Gathering of Nations](#)

- You will often see these dances shared to bring visibility to important movements, such as Indigenous Peoples Day, Native American Heritage Month, MMIP (Missing and Murdered Indigenous People) events, and Land Back initiatives.
- Forced relocation to reservations structurally disrupted our seasonal rhythms, causing certain dances and structural rites of passage to be lost over time. Today, the focus is on returning to the arena the right way, by reclaiming our ancestral protocols and living out our traditional lifeways to honor the generations who carried these dances forward.

Activities

Think about how the relatives of the land impact you and how you do honor them? This is the same reasoning for many of these dances.

10 Min: Feel! Introduce the diverse styles of powwow dance and have students observe or listen to the distinct rhythms that anchor them.

"Listen to the drumbeat and the voices of the singers. You can tell the differences in styles of songs by the sound of the singers: Southern songs have lower-pitched voices, and the Northern style has a higher pitch. Think about these dances and how they may relate to you, your Tribe, or your Nation. These dances call out to the individual. The movements of these dances are important to consider because there is a right way and a wrong way to do them. Which dance do you think might connect with you, and why?"

15 Min: Connect! Dive into the creation stories and ecological relationships mimicking the land and its non-human relatives.

"Our dances are a direct mirror of our environment. Grass dance mimics the movement of grass blowing in the prairies; this dance is traditionally carried out at the beginning of every dance so the dancers can pray over the land and flatten the grounds before the powwow. Women's fancy shawl uses vibrant colors and athleticism to mimic the butterfly. Men's chicken dance honors the mating dance of the prairie chicken with quick footwork and vibrant colors. Men's Traditional, Southern Straight, and Woodland are warriors telling their war story or telling a story of stalking prey in a hunt. Then there are the sacred stories of healing, such as the jingle dress dance. This dance was created because of a young girl who was sick, wanted to dance, but was too weak. Her father had a vision of a dress, and he made it for her. When she went out into the circle, she began to dance as though she was healed—and this is how the jingle dress came to be. Women's Traditional cloth and Buckskin are dances that honor the matriarchs of our societies as they dance with poise and grace. Social dances, like the round dance, bring people together in solidarity and connection with one another in peace, healing, and harmony."

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20 Min: *Play!* Give students space to interact with the rhythm. If they are comfortable, they can try out basic footwork to feel the connection between the drum, their steps, and the earth.

“Try them out if you’re comfortable. As you move, think about how the animals and plants move. If you are practicing the Grass Dance, feel how your feet step to flatten the earth, preparing a safe space for others. If you are moving like the butterfly in the Fancy Shawl, feel the athleticism required to lift off the ground. How does physically moving like our non-human relatives change the way you look at a prairie, a bird, or an insect?”

Dance, Movement, and Climate Resilience: The wild prairies of the grass dance are facing extreme droughts, and the habitats of the prairie chicken and the butterfly are shrinking. When we dance, we are keeping the memory of these relatives alive in the modern world. Mirroring their movements is not a performance; it is an ecological reminder of our responsibility to protect them. By standing up for the land and restoring these habitats, we make sure that the prairie chickens will always have a place to dance, the native grasses will continue to blow in the wind, and our dance circles will remain unbroken.

Reciprocity through Stewardship

Through lived experiences, these dance styles are deeply guided by prayer, the honoring of specific individuals, and a responsibility to our non-human relatives. To practice true reciprocity, we must look at how our dances directly interact with the restoration of the earth. Historically and traditionally, some Tribes sing specific songs or dance during agricultural harvesting and ecological restoration events, using the rhythm of their feet and the intent of their bodies to actively revive the lands.

Because human-induced climate change, forced relocation, and historical bans have fractured both our ecosystems and our seasonal movements, our role as active stewards is significant. To honor this responsibility, students can practice an act of reciprocity by connecting their own physical movements to the care of a local landscape. This can be done by spending time outside flattening and preparing soil for planting, gathering and cleaning up a local riparian area or walkway, or participating in the physical restoration of a native plant habitat.

Our dances are fueled by the land, the harvests, and the medicine that the earth gives us. When we offer our energy back to the soil by tending a garden, cleaning a local waterway, or restoring a native habitat, we are honoring those gifts. We are ensuring that the prairie chicken still has a place to dance, the grasses continue to grow, and the circle of our traditions stays unbroken for the next seven generations.