

# FIRST VOICES

Digital storytelling creating next-level opportunities for Indigenous youth

## Resource for Educators Telling Your Own Story



### First Voices Northern Cheyenne Stories Tsèhésenèstsestotse (The Big Dipper) and The Great Race

#### Lesson Overview

Students will view two Northern Cheyenne ancestral stories. Tsèhésenèstsestotse (The Big Dipper) is narrated by two Northern Cheyenne Elders with elements of music, visual art, choreography, and dance. The Great Race is depicted by Lame Deer High School students in their own words using the same elements.

Students will discuss the two stories and then plot a story that is of importance to their lives. Depending on context, these may be Indigenous or non-Indigenous stories, from students' own background and/or experience, or beyond.

#### Subjects:

- Native American studies, specifically Northern Cheyenne culture and language in Montana
- Storytelling, which can be integrated into history, ELA (language arts), visual arts, music composition and sound design, choreography, dance, and film

### **Duration**

2 class periods or workshops of 60 minutes or more. This can also be expanded to cover a longer duration.

Each digital story is roughly 9 minutes. Allow roughly 30 minutes for viewing the stories plus discussion, instruction, creation of student story scenes, sharing of scenes, and concluding discussion.

### **Grade Levels**

High School and college students (can be adapted for other grade levels)

### **Indigenous Cultures Featured**

Northern Cheyenne Tribe of Montana

### **First Voices Stories Featured**

Tsèhésenèstsestotse - The Big Dipper

**NEED NAME HERE** - The Great Race

### **Student Learning Objectives**

- Students will gain increased knowledge of the culture of the Northern Cheyenne tribe
  - Appreciation and understanding of the cultural and ancestral relevance of The Big Dipper and The Great Race stories to Northern Cheyenne culture
  - Increased awareness of Indigenous language (Northern Cheyenne) and its continued use and relevance in the present day
- Students will understand two ancestral Northern Cheyenne stories told in collaboration with Blackfeet, Chippewa Cree, and non-Native artists.
- Students will see the relevance of an ancestral Indigenous story within this current moment in contemporary life.
- Students will understand an ancestral Northern Cheyenne story through the lens of their own experience.
- Students will increase their understanding of strategies for storytelling (use of written and spoken language, music, performance, movement, visual art, filmmaking, etc.).

### **Essential Understandings (Montana Indian Education for All)**

#### Essential Understanding 1

There is great diversity among the twelve sovereign tribes of Montana in their languages, cultures, histories, and governments. Each tribe has a distinct and unique cultural heritage that contributes to modern Montana.

#### Essential Understanding 3

The ideologies of Native traditional beliefs and spirituality persist into modern day life as tribal cultures, traditions, and languages are still practiced by many American Indian people and are incorporated into how tribes govern and manage their affairs. Additionally, each tribe has its

own oral histories, which are as valid as written histories. These histories pre-date the “discovery” of North America.

## Activities

### Preparation and Equipment Needed

Based on the number of students, the stories will be displayed on a large screen or projected. All students should be able to see the stories well and hear the sound clearly. Confirm internet connection to stream the story from First Voices website (<https://www.threshdance.org/fv-current-and-future>). If internet connectivity is an issue, contact First Voices ([info@threshdance.org](mailto:info@threshdance.org)) to request a downloadable copy.

### Introduction

Questions Before Viewing:

- These questions, even if students do not have knowledge in this area, will be an indicator of students’ understandings and attitudes before watching the stories.
  
- What do you [students] know about the Northern Cheyenne tribe? What would you like to share?
  - If the group is familiar with Northern Cheyenne culture, ask if anyone knows any history, stories, or the language. Where have they learned these things? Why shared the knowledge?
  - If the group is not familiar with Northern Cheyenne culture, ask students what they know about Indigenous culture(s) in their area or more broadly.
    - If students are unfamiliar with Native cultures, ask where they have gained what knowledge they do have (internet, movies, TV, songs). Do those sources specify a tribe or depict all Indigenous people broadly? Do students think their sources are reliable? Why or why not.

### Viewing the Ancestral Stories

There are two options. Educators may screen both stories and ask students to compare them or consider them together. Each story could also be screened and studied as separate lessons.

### Discussion Questions after Viewing Stories

Give the students a few moments after viewing. See if they are speaking among themselves, seem eager to share, or are quietly considering the stories. Utilize Visual Thinking Strategies questions to begin a discussion on each story with students. Always leave some time for students to think before answering. Those 30 second to a minute often lead to thoughtful responses.

[Tsèhéseenèstsestotse \(The Big Dipper\) \(9 minutes 14 seconds\)](https://youtu.be/hzS4O34D9ko)

<https://youtu.be/hzS4O34D9ko>

- What did you think was going on in The Big Dipper story?

- What did you see or hear that makes you say that?
- What else did you notice from the story?
- What was one way that the story was told that stood out to you? Why?

*(This question is about whether students noticed and/or connected with the verbal narration, subtitles, dance/movement, music, backgrounds, painting, etc. as ways of telling a story.)*

- Why do you think this story was told in the Northern Cheyenne language?
- Why subtitle it in English? Who benefits from the subtitling?
- If educational setting or students are focused on language, you can also show this behind-the-scenes video, “Difference Between Speaking Cheyenne and English” With Ruthie Shoulder Blade and Alaina Buffalo Spirit  
<https://vimeo.com/508314491>

#### The Great Race (8 minutes 50 seconds)

<https://youtu.be/0lu9UvSUUc8>

- What did you think was going on in The Great Race story?
- What did you see or hear that makes you say that?
- What else did you notice from the story?
- What was different about hearing the story from high school students after hearing an elder tell a story?

#### Tsèhésenèstsestotse (The Big Dipper) & The Great Race

- What did you learn about Northern Cheyenne culture from these stories?

Based on students’ responses, share information about Northern Cheyenne culture and the tribe from the resources listed below. (For example, if students felt like they learned what the land is like in that area, discuss Lame Deer, MT where the stories were created.) Did students’ observations align with this information? What did they glean from the stories? What did they learn from continued discussion?

#### **Student Activity**

**Students will create one scene from their own story** based on an experience, stories they have been told, or stories that have a special meaning to them using the media best suited for this class. The medium could be oral storytelling, a written story, script, storyboard, song, visual art, performance, or a multimedia story (combining several elements like what was just seen). In a less structured environment, ask students *how* they would like to tell their stories (music, film, etc.). Students can work alone or collaboratively.

#### Discussion

- What stories about their own culture or life experiences are meaningful to them? Any stories about family or friends? Any other types of stories (books, movies, etc.) that are meaningful?
  - This will get students thinking of stories they know as a point of comparison with the Northern Cheyenne stories.
- Ask students to choose three storytelling strategies that were used to tell the Big Dipper or Great Race stories. What part of the story did those elements convey?
  - What strategy would they use for their story? (This may be tailored to the subject matter of the class, such as ELA, music, visual art, etc.)

### Creation

Choose one meaningful scene from your own story.

Select one element that you can convey to an audience (one place, one person, one image, one emotion, etc.)

Why is that the element you chose? How do you show why it is important? (exaggeration, contained body language or wild movements, choice of colors, a repeated phrase that is written or sung)

Dance/Movement: What are the gestures of your body?

Visual Art: Will you create something representational or use colors and techniques to create a feeling? Suggest using watercolor paint or drawing with basic pencils and sharpies.

Writing (ELA): Write a short paragraph or several lines of a poem that encapsulate the scene from your story.

Music/Sound Design: Create 30 second worth of music or sound that conveys your scene

Filmmaking: Use your phone to create a 30 second scene. Will you recreate something literal or convey a mood or emotion using your phone's camera?

### Sharing

If students are comfortable, ask them to present or perform their story. Ask them to point out specific influences of the Northern Cheyenne digital stories on their scene.

### **Conclusion**

Discuss similarities and differences between telling their own stories and the Northern Cheyenne digital stories.

Connect with storytelling in a broader sense. The passing down of stories can create oral histories and sustain cultural knowledge. People like Ruthie Shoulder Blade are keepers of knowledge who have learned or been given a story.

First Voices: Why Story Telling is Important. Ruthie Shoulder Blade and Alaina Buffalo Spirit  
<https://vimeo.com/508314602>

First Voices: Why Is the Tsèhésenèstsestotse Story Meaningful to the Northern Cheyenne People? Ruthie Shoulder Blade and Alaina Buffalo Spirit  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HmlR2YxSD10>

This lesson can stand alone to create one scene from students' stories or continue, building multiple scenes to tell the complete story.

### **Assessment**

In class discussion, did students discuss elements of the story that were connected to Northern Cheyenne culture?

Did students make observations about the stories being told in the present-day or having connections to world events today or in their own lives?

Did students incorporate elements of storytelling used in the two digital stories into their own story?

Are students interested or in need of more resources on Northern Cheyenne culture or Indigenous ways of telling stories? See below for more resources to continue the learning.

### **Artists Who Created Stories:**

#### Tsèhésenèstsestotse (The Big Dipper)

- Ruthie Shoulder Blade, Northern Cheyenne Elder, Northern Cheyenne storyteller/narrator
- Alaina Buffalo Spirit, a senior member of the So'taa'ee band of the Northern Cheyenne Nation, visual artist <https://www.redcurtainproject.org/alaina-buffalo-spirit>
- Sammy Jo Bird, Blackfeet, visual artist <https://cowboylifestylenetwork.com/industry-sammy-jo-bird/>
- Chontay Standing Rock, Chippewa and Cree, sound designer and composer <https://open.spotify.com/artist/4phRJ58tsaApyMRAGJRXyv>
- Preeti Vasudevan, Artistic Director, Thresh, First Voices choreographer and cultural storyteller <https://www.threshdance.org/about>

#### The Great Race

- Lame Deer High School students, Northern Cheyenne storytellers, performers, and visual artists
- Susan Wolfe, Lame Deer High School visual arts teacher <https://montanafreepress.org/2023/04/26/art-bringing-northern-cheyenne-students-closer-together/>
- Seidel Standing Elk, Northern Cheyenne, So-taaeo-o, Lame Deer High School Northern Cheyenne culture teacher <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5SZx9s7D4NQ>

- Pete Tolton, filmmaker, Billings Open Studio  
<https://voicesofmontana.com/podcast/pete-tolton-director-of-the-feature-length-documentary-return/>
- Tami Haaland, poet, Montana State University Dean of the School of Liberal Arts & Social Sciences <https://www.tamihaaland.com/about>
- Ben Pease, Apsáalooke (Crow) and Northern Cheyenne, visual artist  
<https://www.benpeasevisions.com/artist>
- John Roberts, Department Chair & Associate Professor, Low Brass)  
<https://www.johnroberts.net/bio#:~:text=Roberts%20is%20a%20Professor%20of,studio%20musician%20and%20composer%2Farranger.>
- Preeti Vasudevan, Artistic Director, Thresh, First Voices choreographer and cultural storyteller
- Joseph R. McGeshick, Assiniboine, Sioux, and Chippewa Cree, poet, educator, and Native American Studies Adjunct Professor, Fort Peck Community College  
[https://www.abebooks.com/servlet/SearchResults?an=mcgeshick%20joseph&cm\\_sp=det- -plp- -author](https://www.abebooks.com/servlet/SearchResults?an=mcgeshick%20joseph&cm_sp=det- -plp- -author)

## Resources on Northern Cheyenne Culture

Northern Cheyenne Tribe

Indian Nations: Northern Cheyenne Video, Montana Office of Tourism

[https://vimeo.com/74944680?embedded=true&source=vimeo\\_logo&owner=1891228](https://vimeo.com/74944680?embedded=true&source=vimeo_logo&owner=1891228)

Montana Indians: Their History and Location

<https://opi.mt.gov/Portals/182/Page%20Files/Indian%20Education/Indian%20Education%20101/Montana%20Indians%20Their%20History%20and%20Location.pdf>

Chief Dull Knife College – Woodenlegs Listening Library

<https://woodenlegslibrary.com/listening-library>

Native Knowledge 360: Homelands: Northern Cheyenne

<https://americanindian.si.edu/nk360/plains-belonging-homelands/northern-cheyenne.cshtml>

## Additional Resources

Montana Office of Public Instruction Indian Education for All Website

<https://opi.mt.gov/Educators/Teaching-Learning/Indian-Education-for-All>

Map of Tribal Territories in Montana

<https://www.montana.edu/iefai/introductiontomtribalnations/tribalterritories.html>

## **Resources For Non-Native Educators**

Teaching and Learning About Native Americans (Frequently Asked Questions)

<https://americanindian.si.edu/nk360/faq/did-you-know>

What is the correct terminology: American Indian, Indian, Native American, Indigenous, or Native?

<https://americanindian.si.edu/nk360/informational/impact-words-tips>

Evaluating American Indian Materials and Resources for the Classroom

<https://opi.mt.gov/Portals/182/Page%20Files/Indian%20Education/Indian%20Education%20101/Evaluating%20AI%20Materials%20and%20Resources%20for%20the%20Classroom.pdf?ver=2019-04-22-155858-340>