



The Gambler

Introduction

“The Gambler,” a song written by Don Schlitz, was made famous by country singer Kenny Rogers in 1978. The song features a mysterious character—a lifelong gambler—whom the singer meets by chance on a train “bound for nowhere.” The gambler offers worldly advice, based on his experiences as a gambler, in exchange for a swig of whiskey and a cigarette.

In the song, gambling appears to be a metaphor for life. In facilitating the instructional strategies below, the teacher is advised to not draw attention to this immediately. If none of the students picks up on this, the teacher could then probe with questions such as, “So, how does this relate to our daily lives?” The questions in the first strategy are designed to get the students to reflect critically on issues and cultural assumptions related to gambling. It is important to let the students engage in the inquiry without imposing lessons to be learned. On the other hand, later in the process teachers should feel free to offer their own views as part of the discussion.

The song lyrics

On a warm summer's eve
On a train bound for nowhere
I met up with the gambler
We were both too tired to sleep
So we took turns a-starin'
Out the window at the darkness
The boredom overtook us,
And he began to speak

He said, "Son, I've made a life
Out of readin' people's faces
Knowin' what the cards were
By the way they held their eyes
So if you don't mind me sayin'
I can see you're out of aces
For a taste of your whiskey
I'll give you some advice"

So I handed him my bottle
And he drank down my last swallow
Then he bummed a cigarette
And asked me for a light
And the night got deathly quiet
And his face lost all expression
He said, "If you're gonna play the game, boy
You gotta learn to play it right

You've got to know when to hold 'em
Know when to fold 'em
Know when to walk away
And know when to run
You never count your money
When you're sittin' at the table
There'll be time enough for counting
When the dealin's done

Every gambler knows
That the secret to survivin'
Is knowin' what to throw away
And knowin' what to keep
'Cause every hand's a winner
And every hand's a loser
And the best that you can hope for is to die
In your sleep

And when he finished speakin'
He turned back toward the window
Crushed out his cigarette
And faded off to sleep
And somewhere in the darkness
The gambler he broke even
But in his final words
I found an ace that I could keep

You've got to know when to hold 'em
Know when to fold 'em
Know when to walk away
And know when to run
You never count your money
When you're sittin' at the table
There'll be time enough for countin'
When the dealin's done

Instructional strategies

1. Ask students to listen to “[The Gambler](#)” then display or give them the [lyrics handout](#) and play it again. Facilitate a discussion about the song lyrics. You might use questions like those below.
 - What line(s) in the song caught your attention? Why? What do they suggest to you? Do you agree or disagree with the message? Why?
 - When the gambler says, “If you’re gonna play the game, boy, you gotta learn to play it right,” what is he getting at? Do you think he gives good advice? Explain.
 - When the gambler says, “every hand's a winner, and every hand's a loser,” is he right? Explain.
 - What do you think the gambler means by, “You never count your money/When you're sittin' at the table/There'll be time enough for countin'/When the dealin's done”?
 - The gambler died in his sleep on the train. From what you know from the song, do you think he had a good life? Explain.
 - The song writer says, “in his final words I found an ace that I could keep.” What do you think he means? Would you consider that an ace? Why or why not?
2. After listening to the song as above, have students write about gambling:
 - Encourage students to imagine and write the backstory of the gambler. What factors contributed to his being a life-long gambler? What skills did he possess, and how did he acquire them? How much of his successes were based on skill? How much was based on luck? How did he happen to be on that train, and why was he bumming alcohol and cigarettes? or
 - Invite students to write their own lyrics to a song or poem about gambling. Encourage them to think about gambling in a particular cultural context (maybe from their Social Studies course) and to reflect on its meaning in that context and what lessons (from positive to negative and everything in between) can be learned.
3. Ask students to draw or paint an image that comes to mind from “The Gambler.” Remind them that in the song gambling is a metaphor for life. Ask them to try to reflect some life lesson in their artwork. Then have an ‘art show’ in which students can display their work and talk to one another about why they imagined gambling looking that way.

Gambling literacy

Big ideas

- Gambling can be a fun recreational activity but can also lead to significant harm
- As humans, both individually and as communities, we need to learn how to manage gambling in our midst
- We can learn how to control gambling by examining the different ways people have thought about it, engaging in critical self-reflection and listening to each other

Competencies

- Assess the complex ways in which gambling is linked to human culture and impacts the health and wellbeing of individuals, families, communities and societies
- Explore and appreciate the diverse cognitive, social, emotional and physical factors that impact gambling behaviour
- Develop personal and social skills to reflect on and manage personal behaviour and choices related to gambling



For a complete look at the gambling literacy competencies, as defined by the Centre for Addictions Research of BC, see: <http://www.uvic.ca/research/centres/cisur/assets/docs/iminds/hs-gambling-curriculum.pdf>

Links to Curriculum

First Peoples' principles of learning

- Learning is holistic, reflexive, reflective, experiential, and relational (focused on connectedness, on reciprocal relationships, and a sense of place)
- Learning involves recognizing the consequences of one's actions
- Learning involves generational roles and responsibilities
- Learning is embedded in memory, history, and story

English Language Arts 7

Big ideas

- Exploring stories and other texts helps us understand ourselves and make connections to others and to the world
- Questioning what we hear, read, and view contributes to our ability to be educated and engaged citizens

Competencies

- Apply appropriate strategies to comprehend written, oral, and visual texts, guide inquiry, and extend thinking
- Think critically, creatively, and reflectively to explore ideas within, between, and beyond texts
- Recognize and identify the role of personal, social, and cultural contexts, values, and perspectives in texts
- Construct meaningful personal connections between self, text, and world
- Respond to text in personal, creative, and critical ways
- Exchange ideas and viewpoints to build shared understanding and extend thinking
- Use writing and design processes to plan, develop, and create engaging and meaningful literary and informational texts for a variety of purposes and audiences

Arts Education 7

Big ideas

- Experiencing art challenges our point of view and expands our understanding of others
- Engaging in the arts develops people's ability to understand and express complex ideas

Competencies

- Create artistic works collaboratively and as an individual using ideas inspired by imagination, inquiry, experimentation, and purposeful play
- Explore relationships between identity, place, culture, society, and belonging through the arts
- Interpret and communicate ideas using symbols and elements to express meaning through the arts