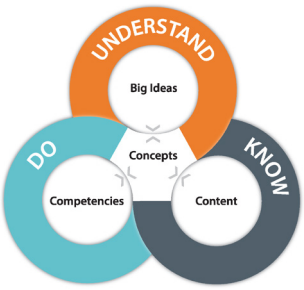
Ode to the Dice



Ode to the Dice is an ancient Indian hymn in the tenth book of the Rig Veda (c. 4000-1500 BCE). It features a gambler addressing the dice that have all but destroyed his life. The ode describes how the gambler loses wealth and material assets, family, self-respect, peace of mind and social prestige.

This hymn is one of the earliest documented accounts of gambling in the world. While it mostly paints a negative picture of gambling by depicting the potential harms associated with it, it is a beautiful piece of poetry that explores, through different themes, the phenomenology of gambling.

This lesson plan uses the lyrics of Ode to the Dice to get students to explore different gambling-related themes.

Instructional strategies

1. Distribute the Ode to the Dice handout included at the end of this document and invite the students to read it. Then facilitate a class discussion using some or all of the questions below:
   - **a.** The gambler talks about challenges he endures due to his gambling behaviour. In the very first section, in fact, he talks about driving his wife away, losing his relationships, losing money, etc. How would you describe the way these challenges affected him?
   - **b.** Consider the way the gambler talks about luck. Is luck enough when it comes to gambling? Why or why not? What other factors might be at play?
   - **c.** In the ode, the gambler talks to the dice, pleading with them to treat him as a friend, not a foe. What does it say about his relationship with gambling? What is the gambler trying to do here? Is the gambler a victim? Is he a slave? Does he have a responsibility in his fate? Discuss.
   - **d.** Is the gambler to blame for his predicament? Should a "luckless gambler" be punished?
   - **e.** Is there any hope for the gambler? Why or why not?
   - **f.** When you play games, do you do things to increase your luck? If so, explain.
   - **g.** Ode to the Dice focuses on the negative impacts that gambling can have on a person's life. Do you think gambling can have benefits? How can people manage their gambling to reduce potential risks?

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2. Draw students' attention to the passage below. Then use the questions that follow to explore its meaning.

   "Downward they roll, then jump in the air!
   Though handless, they master those who have hands!
   Unearthly coals thrown down on the board,
   though cold they burn the player's heart to ashes"

   a. What do you think the author means in this paragraph?

   b. Each line contains a combination of clashing terms, such as 'downward' and 'in the air' in line 1. Why do you think the author presents contradictory concepts? Are contradictions significant in life? Discuss.

   c. Balance is often needed in life in order to achieve health and well-being. How can we achieve balance when life is full of contradictions?

   d. How can we achieve balance when it comes to behaviours that entail risk, such as speeding, using alcohol or other drugs, or gambling?

3. Have students write about gambling using the ideas and questions below:

   a. Encourage students to imagine and write the backstory of the gambler.

      i. What factors do you think contributed to his developing such a strong relationship with dice/gambling?

      ii. What might have contributed to the negative consequences of playing dice?

      iii. What are some of the positive aspects of gambling that might have kept him going despite all the fallouts?

   b. 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 (perhaps one related to Social Studies) and to reflect on its meaning in that context. If desired, ask them to reflect on the positive and negative lessons that can be learned.

4. Ask students to draw or paint an image that comes to mind from Ode to the Dice. Encourage them to use their imagination and ask them to try to reflect on a concept related to gambling (such as risk, chance, etc.) in their artwork. Then have an 'art show' in which students can display their work and talk to one another about why they imagined the poem 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

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Competencies

- ✓ Assess the complex ways in which gambling is linked to human culture and impacts the health and well-being 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 Canadian Institute for Substance Use Research, see: https://www.uvic.ca/research/centres/cisur/assets/docs/iminds/hs-gambling-curriculum.pdf

Links to curriculum

First Peoples' principles of learning

- ✓ Learning ultimately supports the well-being of the self, the family, the community, the land, the spirits, and the ancestors
- ✓ Learning is holistic, reflexive, reflective, experiential, and relational (focused on connectedness, on reciprocal relationships, and a sense of place)

English Language Arts 7

Big ideas

- ✓ Exploring text and story helps us understand ourselves and make connections to others and to the world
- ✓ Exploring and sharing multiple perspectives extends our thinking

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
- ✓ 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

- ✓ Engaging in the arts develops people's ability to understand and express complex ideas
- ✓ Dance, drama, music, and visual arts are each unique languages for creating and communicating

Competencies

- ✓ Take creative risks to express feelings, ideas, and experiences
- ✓ Express, feelings, ideas, and experiences through the arts

This resource was developed by the **Canadian Institute for Substance Use Research** with funding provided by the **BC Responsible & Problem Gambling Program**. Any views expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the BC Responsible & Problem Gambling Program or the Canadian Institute for Substance Use Research.

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Ode to the Dice lyrics

The Gambler:

These nuts that once tossed on tall trees in the wind
but now smartly roll over the board, how I love them!
As alluring as a draught of Soma on the mountain,
the lively dice have captured my heart.
My faithful wife never quarreled with me
or got angry; to me and my companions
she was always kind, yet I've driven her away
for the sake of the ill-fated throw of a die.

Chorus:

His wife's mother loathes him, his wife rejects him,
he implores people's aid but nowhere finds pity.
A luckless gambler is no more good
than an aged hack to be sold on the market.
Other men make free with the wife of a man
whose money and goods the eager dice have stolen.
His father and mother and brothers all say,
"He is nothing to us. Bind him, put him in jail!"

The Gambler:

I make a resolve that I will not go gaming.
So my friends depart and leave me behind.
But as soon as the brown nuts are rattled and thrown,
to meet them I run, like an amorous girl.

Chorus:

To the meeting place the gambler hastens.
Shall I win? He asks himself, hoping and trembling,
But the throws of the dice ruin his hopes,
giving the highest scores to his opponent.

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Dice, believe me, are barbed: they prick and they trip,
they hurt and torment and cause grievous harm.
To the gambler they are like children's gifts, sweet as honey, but they turn on the winner in rage and destroy him.
Fifty-three strong, this band jumps playfully,
like Savitri, the god whose statutes are true.
They pay no heed to the anger of the powerful;
the king himself bows down before them.
Downward they roll, then jump in the air!
Though handless, they master those who have hands!
Unearthly coals thrown down on the board,
though cold they burn the player's heart to ashes.
Abandoned, the wife of the gambler grieves.
Grieved too, is his mother as he wanders to nowhere.
Afraid and in debt, ever greedy for money,
he steals in the night to the home of another.
He is seized by remorse when he sees his wife's lot,
beside that of another with well-ordered home.
In the morning, however, he yokes the brown steeds
and at the evening falls stupid before the cold embers.

The Gambler to the dice:

To the mighty chieftain of your whole band,
the one who has become the king of your troop,
to him I show my ten fingers extended.
No wealth do I withhold! I speak truly!

Chorus:

Steer clear of dice. Till well your own field.
Rejoice in your portion and value it highly.
See there, O Gambler, your cattle, your wife.
This is the counsel of the noble Savitri.

The Gambler to the dice:

Grant us your friendship, have mercy upon us!
Do not overwhelm us with your fierce attack!
May your anger and evil intention be assuaged!
Let the brown dice proceed to ensnare another!

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