



Sticks, Stones and Broken Bones

This lesson gives students an opportunity to explore the meanings ancient peoples gave to gambling and reflect on what their early notions might tell us about gambling today.

Gambling has been around in various forms for thousands of years. Many ancient peoples, including the Romans and Mesopotamians, played with animal bones known as astragali (the area just above the heel bone). Over time, bones were fashioned into dice: Indigenous Peoples in New Mexico made small bone disks with ticked edges and around 3000 BCE the Mesopotamians created six-sided bone dice. Other forms of gambling included board games and racing. For instance, the Chinese bet on dog and horse races and people in India bet on chariots races.

But how did gambling start? No one can say for sure. Some historians suggest gambling grew out of a fascination among ancient peoples with chance and mysterious things they couldn't explain (the ever-present unknown). This line of reasoning contends that past peoples threw objects like sticks, stones and bones as a way to predict the future or guide their decisions and eventually they progressed to placing bets on the outcome of a throw.

Ancient peoples' understanding of gambling and random chance was linked with their beliefs about divination and the supernatural. Indications of this can be found in ceremonies practiced by the Zuñi and the Hopi Peoples of North America who offered dice and other gaming equipment at altars to help them have success, for instance to defeat their opponents or increase the yield of their corn crops. Gaming and gambling were also sacred acts for ancient peoples. Gaming diagrams were built into the roofing slabs of a temple in Ancient Egypt and the aim of a Hindu dice game was to enter the gates of heaven.

Gambling among ancient peoples involved the magical and sacred, but they were also likely looking to have some fun. Likewise, modern gamblers want to have fun but they also may try to influence chance through certain beliefs, thoughts and actions. Just as ancient diviners throwing bones believed in a magical or supernatural power controlling the way the bones came to rest, some modern gamblers believe in a mysterious power directing the role of the dice. Others may follow certain rituals, for instance where they sit at the blackjack table or how they handle the cards. And, still others may recall unusual coincidences and psychic experiences after winning the lottery, leading some researchers to conclude that “the lottery is the only reliable miracle left in this age of reason” (Gudgeon & Stewart, 2001).

Instructional strategies

1. Have students read the handout or present the material in your own words. Then facilitate a class discussion or have students work in small groups to address one or more of the following themes. You might use questions like those provided.
 - a. **Culture and gambling**
 - What roles do you think gambling play in ancient cultures? Why do you think ancient peoples gambled? What do you think ancient peoples got out of gambling? Explain.
 - What roles do you think gambling play in cultures today? Why do you think modern peoples gamble? What do you think modern peoples get out of gambling? Explain.
 - How is gambling today similar to gambling in ancient times? How is it different?

b. Rational or irrational

- Would you characterize the gambling behaviour of ancient people as “rational” or “irrational”? Why?
- Many Canadians gamble. Would you characterize their behaviour as “rational” or “irrational”? Why?
- What do you think about
 - Trying to predict the outcome of a game through an omen (e.g., “if x happens I will win”)?
 - Blowing on the dice before rolling them?
 - Using your “lucky numbers” in any kind of lottery?
 - Throwing dice to make decisions?

Which are “rational”? Which are “irrational”?

c. Magic, chance and skill

- At the core of gambling seems to be a fascination with the unknown. To what degree do you think you can control the unknown by building your skill? What are the limitations? Give examples.
 - Ancient peoples, it seems, often turned to rituals or magic to give them an edge in trying to predict the unknown. Are these strategies similar or different than those used by some gamblers today (e.g., offering money to local gods in Taiwan or touching the cards in a ritualistic way in Las Vegas)? What beliefs do you think might underlie this behaviour?
 - Gambling involves predicting the unknown usually related to some element of chance. If something happens by chance, can it be accurately predicted? Can you influence the outcome through any means? Explain.
 - In ancient times, the Chinese played a board game called Po that involved both skill and chance. What modern gambling activities involve both skill and chance? What implications might this have for gambling? Does it mean those games are easier to win at?
2. Dreams guided games and gambling in some ancient civilizations. The Huron peoples of North America, for example, fasted before a contest to bring on dreams that would give them clues about the result of a game. Read/distribute/display the following story (excerpted from a book about modern gamblers who tried to influence their chance of winning the lottery by dreaming about it) and then facilitate a discussion using questions like those provided.

“I was working in radio in Port Alberni, BC. I was making like \$1,127 a month, and I just wasn’t making ends meet. It was the baloney-sandwich-in-the-hotel-room kind of thing. I got hold of a book from the library. It was about dreams and how you can jump ahead in time, precognition, and visualize event in the future.”

[Terry] Johnston was particularly interested in the section about lotteries. As hokey as it sounded, he decided to give it a try.

“The main idea is that you tell yourself that you’re not trying to think ahead in time, you’re trying to think back. You’ve got your mind set to think, ‘what were those numbers?’ rather than, ‘what will those numbers be?’”

That night, Johnston went to bed prepared to visualize his lottery win. But nothing happened. The next afternoon, he had a snooze before going in to do his evening shift at the radio station.

“I had this vivid dream. I met this man, and he starts telling me these numbers. At any rate I woke up, and I could only remember four of the numbers. I wrote them down. Then I went in to work, and that night over the wire the lottery numbers came through. The first four were the same numbers that I’d written down. And the other two? As soon as I saw them I recognized them from my dream.”

The next week, Johnston tried again. This time, he remembered four numbers – 7, 17, 28, 37 – all of which came up on the March 8 Lotto 6/49 draw. Johnston was \$86.50 richer.

With enough spending money to last a few weeks, Johnston was content. He stopped trying to remember his dreams, and soon forgot exactly how he did it.

“I’ve never been able to reproduce these dreams since then. I wish I could get hold of that book. Besides, money’s not that big a deal to me. At the time it was just a matter of if I could get some groceries I’d be happy” (Gudgeon & Stewart, 2001).

- In order to get additional money, Terry Johnson attempted to influence his chance of winning the lottery by going to a magical place. What do you think about doing that as a way to make money? Why do you think he decided to try dreaming about the winning numbers rather than looking for another way to add to his income?
 - What do you think about attempting to influence gambling through dreaming or visualizing winning?
 - Do you think this practice could ever lead to problems? Explain
3. After discussing at least some of the questions in strategy 1, ask students to explore the question below and then write a short essay or create an artistic response (e.g., drawing, painting, portraiture, collage, word cloud) reflecting their own experience with gambling and drawing parallels with ancient practices.

How might ancient peoples’ notions about gambling, magic and the unknown help us think about our own experiences and ideas about gambling?

Gambling competencies

Big idea

- Every human society appears to have accepted gambling, legal or otherwise, in some form or another
- 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

For a complete look at the gambling literacy competencies, as defined by the Centre for Addictions Research of BC, see: <https://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 recognizes the role of indigenous knowledge
- Learning is embedded in memory, history, and story

Social studies 7

Big idea

- Religious and cultural practices that emerged during this period have endured and continue to influence people

Competencies

- Explain different perspectives on past or present people, places, issues, or events, and compare the values, worldviews, and beliefs of human cultures and societies in different times and places (perspective)
- Assess the significance of people, places, events, or developments at particular times and places (significance)

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