

Smoking the Pipe: Peace or War?

Historical nugget

Summary and excerpts from Hugh A. Dempsey. (2006). Blackfoot Peace Treaties. Alberta History 54(4) 22-26.

Ceremonial smoking pipes were used by many First Nations peoples in North America, but not by all. Smoking the pipe, for many First Nations, is rich in symbolism: offering tobacco to the almighty, demonstrating solidarity and power within a tribe or band, signifying honour and the sacredness of life, as well as marking a commitment, an agreement or a treaty.

The role of tobacco and the ceremonial pipe in marking the end of conflict is quite well known. Even colonial traders got involved because peace between the Nations was good for their business. Hugh Dempsey, a Canadian historian and honorary chief of the Kainai Blackfoot, cites the case of the trader in charge of Fort Edmonton in 1862. The trader writes about how he brokered a peace agreement between the Cree and the Blackfoot.

“The Peace was finally satisfied today in the mess room, the Chiefs of each of the Tribes were present; delivered a paper to each chief confirming the Peace made, signed with the names of all the Chiefs present. Tobacco exchanged & sent to Slave [Blackfoot] Indian camps and Cree camps. All parties saluted each other with a kiss, shook hands and the Crees went off quietly at once. Long may it last.”

Of course, agreements, even when sealed with tobacco, do not necessarily last. The traders later commented, “the Blackfeet and Crees are again at war” and complained that it was bad for business at Fort Edmonton because the Blackfoot would not come to the fort for fear of attack by the Cree.

In more traditional settings a peacemaker would be sent into or near the enemy camp. The peacemaker would bring tobacco, a pipe and other symbolic items. There were many different traditions, but, in one case, when the offer of peace was presented,

“The pipe was passed from the chief to the person who was chosen to smoke and then the person would indicate his satisfaction before taking a puff. The pipe was then returned to the chief and then passed on to the next one who was chosen to smoke. By smoking the gift tobacco, they showed they would make peace.”

Tobacco could play a role in both peace and war. Some nations or tribes had different pipes for different meanings such as a peace pipe and a war pipe that displayed differently. More often, it seems, the meaning was determined by the context. Dempsey writes,

“For example, at the outbreak of the Riel Rebellion in 1885, an influential Siksika chief named Big Plume went to the lodge of his chief, Crowfoot, and presented him with a small bundle containing tobacco, sweetgrass, and bullets. If Crowfoot had smoked the tobacco, it would have indicated his willingness to fight. Instead, he sent the tobacco bundle to Red Crow, head chief of the Bloods, seeking his opinion. Red Crow refused to smoke and sent the tobacco back, showing that he had no intention of joining the fight.”

Being a peacemaker could be very dangerous. Once, Maskepetoon, the great peacemaker of the Cree, led a small party to a hill near the Siksika camp where he sat with a Bible, pipe and tobacco.

“When he was observed, Big Swan, the Siksika chief, rode to the hill with a party of warriors and greeted him. He told the Crees to lay their guns aside and accompany him to the camp. However, as soon as they laid down their weapons, Big Swan gave the order to attack and killed them all.”

Instructional strategies

1. Have students read the excerpts from Hugh Dempsey’s article, “Blackfoot Peace Treaties” (see [handout](#)). Then facilitate a class discussion or have them work in groups. You might use questions like the following to stimulate critical thinking.
 - How would you describe the significance of tobacco and the ceremonial pipe among the First Nations peoples featured in the excerpts?
 - How is it that tobacco smoking could be associated with both peace and war?
 - What is the difference between an object having magical powers and an object having symbolic and sacred meaning? Where does the power reside in each case?
 - Why is it that many treaties that were sealed with a tobacco smoking ceremony were nonetheless broken later, sometimes very quickly?
 - What objects or actions have symbolic meaning and power in our cultures? Does this vary from culture to culture today? Do any of these objects or actions have significance with respect to peace and war? Do people ever use these actions or objects in a treacherous way? If so, can you give examples?
 - Today, friends sometimes pass a cigarette or hookah when they get together. Do you think this has any special meaning? Explain.
2. Watch the [video](#) of the Pipe Ceremony that took place in Winnipeg in 2010 with the class. Although the ceremony was not about war, the significance of the event was to symbolize a “new beginnings between aboriginal and non-aboriginal people.”
 - What did you find interesting/surprising/inspiring in this video?
 - How does the indigenous man in this video describe tobacco and its role in this ceremony? What do you think tobacco symbolizes/represents in this particular ceremony?
 - In the video, someone describes the reconciliation ceremony as one that brings “hope.” Can the ceremony deliver a new beginning, a new relationship? Or does it symbolize what is possible?
 - How can we make the new relationship between indigenous and non-indigenous people (the new peace) a reality?
3. Have students research the history of the treaties between Canada and indigenous peoples. They might start by referring to [A History of Treaty-Making in Canada](#). Then have them work in groups to develop a new peace process for indigenous and non-indigenous people in Canada. They should pay particular attention to what symbolic actions or objects they would include in the peace process. Why would those objects or actions be important?

Drug Literacy

Big ideas

- People have been using drugs for thousands of years and in almost every human culture
- Drugs can be tremendously helpful and also very harmful
- As humans, both individually and as communities, we need to learn how to manage the drugs in our lives
- We can learn how to control our drug use by reflecting on the different ways people have thought about drugs, exploring stories from various cultures and listening to each other



Competencies

- Assess the complex ways in which drugs impact the health and wellbeing of individuals, families, communities and societies
- Explore and appreciate diversity related to the reasons people use drugs, the impact of drug use and the social attitudes toward various drugs
- Recognize binary constructs (e.g., good vs bad) and assess their limitation in addressing complex social issues like drug use
- Develop social and communication skills in addressing discourse and behaviour related to drugs

For a complete look at the drug literacy competencies, as defined by the Centre for Addictions Research of BC, see: www.uvic.ca/research/centres/cisur/assets/docs/iminds/hs-pp-drug-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)
- Learning is embedded in memory, history and story

Social Justice 12

Big Ideas

- Social justice issues are interconnected
- Individual worldviews shape and inform the understanding of social justice issues
- The causes of social injustice are complex and have lasting impacts on society

Competencies

- Use social studies inquiry processes and skills to: ask; gather; interpret; and analyze ideas; and communicate findings and decisions
- Assess and compare the significance of people, events, and developments at particular times and places, and examine what it reveals about social justice issues (significance)
- Ask questions and corroborate inferences about the content, origins, purposes and context of multiple sources and multiple perspectives (evidence)
- Compare and contrast continuities and changes for different groups and individuals in different times and places (continuity and change)
- Determine and assess the long and short term causes and consequences of an event, legislative and judicial decision, development, policy, and movement (cause and consequence)
- Explain different perspectives on past and present people, places, issues and events (perspective)
- Recognize implicit and explicit ethical judgments in a variety of sources (ethical judgment)
- Make reasoned ethical judgments about controversial actions in the past and present after considering the historical context and standards of right and wrong at the time (ethical judgment)

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