
Wisdom of the Elders

Activity Summary

Students will learn to develop and conduct surveys. A take-home portion of the activity will involve setting up a meeting and interview with an “elder” in their family or community. Students will share the Wisdom of the Elders with the class. An extension will be for the class to invite an elder to share stories with the class.

Bringing it Together

One of the primary objectives of this activity is to encourage the students to seek out knowledge from their elders. We are using the Native American term “elder” in this activity as it is a term of respect. As well, it connotes not just age, but wisdom which comes with age. Many educators believe that mentorship is a valuable way to teach children, but often adults are too busy or reluctant to seek out a child to share things. This activity places the responsibility of finding the mentor on the student. By making this a classroom activity which extends into the home or community, it merges formal education with cultural learning.

Objectives

Students will:

- develop survey questionnaires to gain specific information.
- reach out into their family or community to meet and speak with an “elder”.
- share knowledge gained from speaking with an elder with the rest of their class.

Materials

- Student Journals

Note for O'odham Students:

As noted in the previous activity, Tohono O'odham traditionally learn and pass on information orally. Because of this long standing tradition, O'odham elders may be uncomfortable about a student reading questions and writing down answers. In such cases, students should be encouraged to remember the questions they wish to ask (or more specifically, the information they wish to obtain) and remember the responses of the elder with whom they spoke. These students may recount their information orally.

An additional educational component of this activity is in the development of information gathering skills. Students will be responsible for the questions they ask and will develop their own survey questionnaires. They will thus need to consider what kind of information they want and what kinds of questions to ask to obtain that information. The preliminary work they put into the development of their questionnaires will influence the quality of the information they receive. Students will also be responsible for identifying the elder they want to speak with and arranging an interview time. Although they must fill out their survey forms, they should be encouraged to ask other questions once they get a feel for the kinds of information their elder has to offer.

Activity Procedure

1) A good way to begin this activity is with some “words of wisdom”. Read some of the following sayings (or other similar saying of your choosing) to the class:

A stitch in time saves nine.
Don't cry over spilled milk.
Haste makes waste.

Words of Wisdom

1. *Where do "words of wisdom" come from?*
2. *What are most of these sayings based on (truth, experience, reason)?*
3. *From whom do we most often hear such things?*
4. *What happens when we listen to these words of wisdom and take their advice?*

After sharing some sayings with the class, ask for responses from the students. Conduct a discussion on “words of wisdom”. You may use some of the following questions on the left to help guide your discussion:

Help students realize that words of wisdom generally have been passed down through the generations and often, it is people like our parents or grandparents who share these sayings with us. Such sayings are often based on generations of experience and knowledge. We can learn many things from such words of wisdom from those with more experience than ourselves.

2) Discuss the term “Elder” with students. What does it mean to students? Point out its use as a term of respect -- earned by a person with years of experience in life. Do students think of anyone in particular as an elder?

3) Explain that this activity will be about gathering words of wisdom and other information from our elders. Because we are studying the Sonoran Desert, the information students gather should be about life in the desert. Students are to gather this information by identifying, contacting, and interviewing a selected elder in their family or community. The difference between this activity and the “Stories” activity is that students will create surveys with specific questions they want to ask. Students should identify an elder they think might have valuable information about the desert and write down specific questions to ask in order to find out what that person knows (and is willing to share). Our elders know many things about nature and life in the desert. One may be very surprised just how much a person knows -- some people just don't talk about things unless they are asked.

Many of your students may be newcomers to Tucson, moving here with their parents in recent years. Grandparents may live in another part of the country. Have your students consider other sources of information including members of religious groups or neighborhood residents who may be able to assist in the survey.

Taking it Home and Other Extensions

Students should be encouraged to ask their elder to teach them other things about life in the desert which the *elder* thinks is important. Can they go outdoors or to some other location together? Is there an activity they could participate in together? Would the elder come to the student's class and share information? When appropriate, students should keep notes in their journal of all the things they learn from their encounters.

A very exciting extension of this activity could be for students to invite an elder to meet with the class. The class could write a formal letter of invitation and plan a specific event the day of the visit. Students could also choose to have an "Elders" day as a thank you to all the elders who participated in the interviews.

4) Students should next create their surveys. Write the following questions on the board and have students carefully consider them in reference to the person they think they will be interviewing. Have them select four of the questions as ones they will ask their elder and instruct them to write the questions in the "Wisdom of the Elders" section of their Student Journals. They should next think of four more questions they would like to ask and write those questions in their notebooks. These questions should be creative and reflect the kind of information they as students and individuals are most interested in about life in the desert.

Questions for Elders

- ♦ *How has your life been influenced by living in the Sonoran Desert?*
- ♦ *How would you describe your relationship with the desert and the plants and animals of the desert?*
- ♦ *What specific words of wisdom about the desert do you feel are most important to pass on to us younger people?*
- ♦ *Are there specific animals or plants you have had interesting experiences with?*
- ♦ *Have you used specific plants and animals of the desert for food or medicine?*
- ♦ *Who taught you things about nature and the desert?*

5) Review with students the correct procedure for contact and behavior while working with an elder. Remind them to treat these individuals with respect. Be sure their parents know of this "homework" activity and that students have parental permission to meet with an elder. Give students a designated time frame within which to contact and interview their selected elder.

6) Build in a way for students to share their information with the rest of the class. They may read their questions or perhaps write and read a summary of their interview. Students who choose not to write their elder's responses may prefer to draw a picture of their encounter with their elder and share their illustration with the class as they summarize their meeting.

