Dream Catchers

Concepts:
1. Crafts can have deep spiritual meaning.
2. Nature can provide artistic inspiration and materials.
3. Participation in creative activities is one way to explore other cultures.

Outline:
I. Preparation Before Activity (20 min.)

II. Introduction (5 min.)
   A. Greeting, Grabbing, & Purpose
   B. Names and Introduction
   C. Activity Description
   D. Behavior Guidelines
   E. Task Analysis/Learner Assessment

III. Dawn of the Dream Catcher (10 min.)
   A. Origin of the Dream Catcher (Ojibway)
   B. Legend of the Dream Catcher (Lakota)

IV. Structure of the Dream Catcher (10 min.)

V. How to Make a Dream Catcher (1 hr.)
   A. Demonstration
   B. Dream Weavers
   C. Instructions for Making a Dream Catcher

VI. Conclusion (5 min.)

VII. Optional Activities
   A. Dreamy Descriptions
   B. While You Were Sleeping

VIII. Clean Up (20 min.)

IX. Appendix
   A. Equipment
   B. Glossary
   C. Activity and Safety Management
   D. References/Resources
   E. Data Sheets
Dream Catchers

I. Preparation Before Activity

Arrange room to accommodate students. Set up enough tables and chairs to give each student space to work. Write the class title and concepts on the board and set out the instruction cards on the tables. Have willow branches, feathers, beads, scissors, Dream Catcher sample, demonstration hula-hoop, and artificial sinew ready. Read over lesson plan.

II. Introduction

A. Greeting, Grabbing, & Purpose. Greet the students as they enter the room. Begin by asking if the students remember any of their dreams. Invite some of the students to share their dreams with the group.

B. Names and Introductions. Tell the class a little bit about yourself and then go around the group and become familiar with each student. (Be creative: learn names all at once or a few at a time. Use a method that suits your style.) Explain that you will be teaching the group and the other adult chaperones may be assisting at times.

C. Activity Description. This class involves learning about the origin of the dream catcher and how it is made. The first 10 minutes of class will be spent discussing how the Ojibway first invented the dream catcher, how other Native Americans cultures took the idea and incorporated it into their own culture, and the significance of the dream catcher’s construction. The next 10 minutes will be spent demonstrating how to make a dream catcher. For the remainder of class, students will make their own dream catchers.

D. Behavior Guidelines. Discuss clearly and specifically which behaviors you expect from your students during the class. Explain the need for respect: for you, each other, ideas, the equipment, and Eagle Bluff itself.

E. Task Analysis/Learner Assessment. What is a dream catcher?

III. Dawn of the Dream Catcher

Throughout history, nearly every person and culture has placed importance on the meanings of their dreams. Today, dreams are still a powerful force in many people’s lives, particularly because of the meanings that can be found in them. Whether dreams are good or bad, they can inspire, confuse, or upset the dreamer.

In the Ojibway tribe, night visions, or dreams, were so important that children were not given a name until after a person designated as the “namer” of that child had a dream as to what he/she should be called. The “namer” might give the child a charm woven to look like a spider’s web in order to protect the baby’s dreams. Along with other toys,
such as shells, bells, and leather pouches, this “dream catcher” was hung from a hoop on
the child’s cradleboard.

A. The Origin of the Dream Catcher.  Spider web charms, or dream catchers, are
believed to trap bad or unimportant dreams that are floating in the air, much like a
spider’s web snares the insects that fly into it.  The Ojibway were the first to design these
decorations to protect their babies against bad dreams that might come along in the night.
Both good and bad dreams would be caught by the web, but only the good dreams could
slide down the feather to the baby’s head, while the bad ones would not know the way,
and be destroyed with the first rays of morning light.  Read this Ojibway legend aloud to
the class.  It describes how the people began making dream catchers.  (A laminated copy
is included with the kit.)

Long ago in the ancient world of the Ojibway Nation, the Clans were all located in one general
area of that place known as Turtle Island.  This is the way that the old Ojibway storytellers say
how Asibikaashi (Spider Woman) helped Wanabozhoo bring giizis (sun) back to the people.

Asibikaashi took care of her children, the people of the land, and she continues to do so to this
day.  When the Ojibway Nation dispersed to the four corners of North America to fulfill a
prophecy, Asibikaashi had a difficult time making her journey to all those cradle boards.  So, the
mothers, sisters, and Nokomis (grandmothers) took up the practice of weaving the magical webs
for the new babies using willow hoops and sinew or cordage made from plants.  They are in the
shape of a circle to represent how giizis travels each day across the sky.  The dream catcher will
filter out all the bad bawedjigewin (dreams) and allow only good thoughts to enter into our minds
when we are just abinooji (babies).  You will see a small hole in the center of each dream catcher
where the good bawadjige may come through.  With the first rays of sunlight, the bad dreams
would perish.

When we see little Asibikaashi, we should not fear her, but instead respect and protect her.  In
honor of their origin, the number of points where the web connected to the hoop numbered 8 for
Spider Woman’s eight legs or 7 for the Seven Prophecies.

To this day, Asibikaashi will build her special lodge before dawn.  If you are awake at dawn, as
you should be, look for her lodge and you will see this miracle of how she captured the sunrise as
the light sparkles on the dew which is gathered there.

B. Legend of the Dream Catcher (Lakota).  Today Native American artists from many
Nations make dream catchers.  The Lakota are just one group that has incorporated the
dream catcher into their heritage, and they tell a slightly different story of the how this
ornament came to be.  (A laminated copy of this story is included in the kit.)

Long ago when the world was young, an old Lakota spiritual leader was on a high mountain and
had a vision.  In his vision, Iktomi, the great trickster and teacher of wisdom, appeared in the form
of a spider.  Iktomi spoke to him in a sacred language.  As he spoke, Iktomi the spider, picked up
the elder’s willow hoop, which had feathers, horsehair, beads and offerings on it, and began to
spin a web.  He spoke to the elder about the cycles of life; how we begin our lives as infants,
move on through childhood and on to adulthood.  Finally, we go to old age where we must be
taken care of as infants, completing the cycle.

“But,” Iktomi said as he continued to spin his web, “in each time of life there are many forces,
some good and some bad.  If you listen to the good forces, they will steer you in the right
direction.  But, if you listen to the bad forces, they will steer you in the wrong direction and may
hurt you. So these forces can help, or they can interfere with the harmony of nature.” While the spider spoke, he continued to weave his web.

When Iktomì finished speaking, he gave the elder the web and said, “The web is a perfect circle with a hole in the center. Use the web to help your people reach their goals, making good use of their ideas, dreams, and visions. If you believe in the great spirit, the web will catch your good ideas and the bad ones will go through the hole.” The elder passed on his vision to the people, and now many Native American people hang a dream catcher above their bed to sift their dreams and visions. The good is captured in the web of life and carried with the people, but the evil in their dreams drops through the hole in the center of the web and is no longer a part of their lives.

Assessment: Crafts often have deep spiritual meaning.
- Observe students as they make their dream catchers. Are they being creative? Ask them why they think humans use arts and crafts to express themselves.
- Ask students to create their own story about how the dream catcher came to be.

IV. Structure of the Dream Catcher

The dream catcher’s construction is quite simple. It is made with a willow or dogwood branch that is bent in a circle about 3-5 inches in diameter. Sinew is used to weave a web in the middle of the circle much like a spider’s web. The number of points on the web varies depending on what they represent.

Beads and feathers are often used to decorate the dream catcher and both have special meanings associated with them. One bead in the center may represent a spider on the web, whereas, a few beads scattered about the web can symbolize good dreams that have been caught during the night. The feather, a symbol of breath or air, is traditionally attached so that it hangs from the center of the hoop. It may entertain a baby who watches it dangle overhead, but it has also been used to symbolize the value of good air. Often, an owl feather (a woman’s feather representing wisdom) or an eagle feather (a man’s feather representing courage) is used to emphasize those properties.

Dream catchers in the Minnesota region of the early 1900s were typically about three and one half inches in diameter. They were constructed from a wooden hoop strung with a web of nettle-stalk cord. The cord was dyed red with bloodroot and wild plum inner bark. However, some dream catchers were made with dark red yarn. These ornaments were constructed with a different weave than those seen today. Also, the circular hoop is not an exclusive design. Dream catchers from Canada and the northeastern United States are sometimes in a teardrop or snowshoe shape.

Children receive dream catchers made of willow and sinew because these are materials that will eventually dry out and collapse. The decoration’s temporary existence reflects the temporary nature of youth. In contrast, dream catchers made for adults are typically made with woven fiber and do not have a feather. They are meant to reflect adult dreams.

Assessment: Nature can provide artistic inspiration and materials.
- Do any students ask where the materials come from? Where they were found? Have students seen them before?
- Have the group imagine a dream catcher made from man-made materials. Predict its spiritual significance.
V. How to Make a Dream Catcher

A. Demonstration. Show the students the materials necessary to create a dream catcher. It requires a freshly cut willow branch, artificial sinew, one bead, and a feather. Demonstrate each step of making a dream catcher for the students. A tighter web can be woven by separating the sinew into two strands before beginning. Use the hula-hoop with the attached rope to explain the stitch for the web.

B. Dream Weavers. After the short demonstration, allow each student to make a dream catcher. Instruct the students to bend and form their willow branch slowly to decrease its chances of snapping. Remind them to separate the sinew into two strands; a thicker piece may not hold as well. Allow each student to take only one bead and one feather for his or her ornament. Students may need help in all stages of constructing their dream catchers.

C. Instructions for Making a Dream Catcher. See Appendix.

VI. Conclusion

Many Native American cultures include dream catchers in their traditions. These crafts have a great deal of spiritual significance because they are intended to influence the dreams that a person will receive during the night. However, they are also very beautiful and represent a distinct Native American art form. Crafting a dream catcher and having an awareness of the meaning behind them develops a sense of connection with the earth as well as an appreciation for Native American spirituality and culture.

Conclude the class by reviewing the concepts. Ask the students to compare and contrast their own heritage with Native American heritage. Have them summarize the importance of the dream catcher in Native American spirituality. Finally ask them to list reasons for non-Native Americans practicing Native American crafts.

Author Julie Black offers this in her book Dream Catchers, Myths and History:

“While there is much to be said for purity and remaining true to ancient custom, it could also be argued that by widening the applications and uses of the dreamcatcher, by sharing the dreamcatcher with all who are instinctively attracted by its beauty and its deeper
meaning, it has become a living and familiar symbol of human striving for goodness and inner peace.”

You may also wish to share this quote from Sigurd Olson’s book *Runes of the North*.

““My little dream net spoke of many things to me, of love for children, of tolerance and the intangible qualities which give warmth and meaning to life. When I accepted it, I did so with humility because for me it was a symbol not only of trust and acceptance by my Indian friend, but a hint of the long past and a world of dreams most moderns have forgotten.”

**VII. Optional Activities**

**A. Dreamy Descriptions.** Instruct the students to draw or write about a dream that they had. Encourage them to share their pictures or stories with the rest of the group. Have them explain how a dream catcher could help them to remember the dream or help it fade away.

**B. While You Were Sleeping.** Encourage students to hang their dream catchers above their bed and place a piece of paper and a pencil next to their bed at night. Instruct them to say “I will remember my dreams tonight” a couple times before they go to sleep. In the morning, the students should write down their dreams immediately after waking up to see if the dream catcher helped keep away bad dreams that night.

**VIII. Clean Up**

Return beads, feathers, scissors, instruction cards, Dream Catcher sample, and sinew to kit. Place all unused and unbroken willow branches back into the water-filled container. Inventory all equipment. Pick up any scraps from the floor and tables and throw them away. Vacuum the room if necessary. Return tables and chairs to their appropriate place. Inform your group’s liaison of any items that are missing or getting low. It is the liaison’s responsibility to remove the unused willow branches from the kit room when the activity is through for the week.

**IX. Appendix**

**A. Equipment**
- Willow branches
- Sinew
- Beads
- Feathers
- Scissors (3)
- Dream Catcher instruction cards and example in folder
- Dream Catcher sample
- Hula hoop (not in kit) with attached rope

**B. Glossary**

Asibikaashi: Spider Woman
Abinooji: baby
Bawadjige: dream
Bawedjigewin: dreams
Cradle board: A padded board with a handle arching over the infant’s head to which a dream catcher could be attached.
Giizis: sun
Iktomi: Great Trickster and Teacher of Wisdom.
Lakota: a Native American people of the upper Mississippi valley.
Nokomis: grandmothers
Ojibway: a Native American people originally from Michigan.
Sinew: animal tendon

C. Anishinaabemowin (Ojibwe Language). Ojibwe words are spelled phonetically. This is mostly due to the Ojibwe language developing as a spoken language and then Europeans attempting to put it into writing. Often there are several correct ways to spell Ojibwe words. These vowels are pronounced slightly different than in English, others are pronounced the same.

    aa  is pronounced as “ah”
    e   is pronounced as “a” as in “hay”
    ii  is pronounced as “ee” as in “see”

D. Activity and Safety Management. Instruct the students to be careful when shaping their willow branches so that they do not snap. Students must share the scissors and each student may only have one bead and one feather. Students may require a lot of assistance in making their dream catcher, so enlist the help of other available adults.

E. References/Resources


Dearborn, Lyn and Mary Ritchie. In response to a question about the FIRST origin of Dream Catchers, Nov. 1, 1995 to the Native-L Listserver.


Wolf Ridge Lesson Plan on Dream Catcher.

F. Data Sheets

   Instructions for Making a Dream Catcher
1. Carefully bend the vine around to form a circle 5-6 inches across.
2. Twist the piece you are bending around the circle to strengthen the vine hoop.
Station #2

THE HANGING LOOP

1. Use about 10 feet of twine and knot a loop in one end from which you can hang your finished dream catcher.
2. Tie the hanging loop around the top of your dream catcher.
station #3

the first stitch

1. The dream catcher repeats the same stitch from start to finish. To start, hold the string and place it loosely over the top of the hoop.
2. Move the string around the back of the hoop (forming a hole).
3. Pull the string back through the hole you have just made.
4. Pull each stitch taught but not too tight or it will warp the hoop of the dream catcher.
1. Continue the same stitch around the hoop of the dream catcher.
2. Space the stitches evenly, about 1 1/2 to 2 inches apart, making 7-13 stitches around the hoop.
3. The last stitch of the first round should be about half an inch away from the hanging loop.
Station #5  

THE SPIDERS WEB

1. To make the web place the string through the center of each stitch from the previous round rather than the hoop.
2. As you pull each stitch tight, the string from the previous round should bend towards the center of the hoop slightly, forming a diamond shape.
3. On the third or fourth round add a bead to represent the spider in the web. Thread the bead on the string, and then continue stitching.
Station #6  

FINISHING UP

1. Continue stitching towards the center of the hoop, making sure you leave a hole in the center of the dream catcher.
2. Stop at the bottom of the hole and end by stitching twice in the same place, forming a knot. Pull tight.
3. Leave some string to dangle from the center of the dream catcher and tie a feather to the end of the string.
4. Hang over sleeping place. Sweet dreams!