

National Native American Hall of Fame  
2019 Inductee

**OREN LYONS**  
**ONONDAGA NATION**



**SPIRITUAL**  
**SPIRITUAL LEADER**

1 - 2 50-minute class periods

## **SELECTED COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS**

### **CCSS Literacy SL 10-1**

Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

### **CCSS Literacy SL 10-1d**

Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives, summarize points of agreement and disagreement, and, when warranted, qualify or justify their own views and understanding and make new connections in light of the evidence and reasoning presented.

### **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.1**

Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, attending to such features as the date and origin of the information.

### **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.2**

Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of how key events or ideas develop over the course of the text.

### **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.3**

Analyze in detail a series of events described in a text; determine whether earlier events caused later ones or simply preceded them.

## **GOALS FOR UNDERSTANDING**

### **Students will understand**

- Oren Lyons is a great leader during a critically important time for the planet, the age of climate change.

- Oren Lyons has lived a long life in upstate New York on Seneca and Onondaga Nation territories.
- Oren Lyons is a member of the Onondaga Nation.
- Oren Lyons is a visionary leader with the courage to challenge environmental crises our nation and world faces.

## **ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS**

What positions of authority does Oren Lyons occupy in his tribal nation and throughout the world?

Why is Oren Lyons such a well-known voice for the Earth?

How did Oren Lyons become legendary as a leader?

## **ASSESSMENT EVIDENCE**

### **Suggested Formative Assessment of Learning Outcomes**

Active listening through note taking

Small group discussion

Class discussion

### **Culminating Performance Assessment of Learning Outcomes**

- Students will finish their own small group K/W/H/L charts
- Participate in a small group discussion
- Answer the essential questions when reporting out as a group to the class

## **ENTRY QUESTIONS**

Who is Oren Lyons?

What achievements did Oren Lyons accumulate during his life to be inducted into the National Native American Hall of Fame?

Of which Native American Nation is Oren Lyons a recognized clan leader and member?

## **MATERIALS**

Computer and internet access for the following videos is required. Additional written materials for printing is at the end of this lesson.

7-minute talk by Oren Lyons

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=1&v=bSwmqZ272As&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=1&v=bSwmqZ272As&feature=emb_logo)

23-minute Bioneers speech by Oren Lyons

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GsoEK1z9xhc>

10-minute history of the Iroquois Confederacy by Oren Lyons

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9iVziGHPVw>

41-minute Hall of Fame “Inspirational Leadership” interview with Oren Lyons  
[Oren Lyons \(Onondaga Nation\) on Vimeo](#) The interview is also accessible by scanning the Quick Response (QR) code below with a smartphone or QR Reader.



## **LEARNING MODALITIES**

Audio/Visual: Students will watch recorded interviews with Oren Lyons and learn about his historic life and career. Oren’s wit, wisdom and insight are on full display in the videos.

Writing/Recording: Students will take notes while observing the films, identifying key concepts, sentences or statements that Oren makes during his interviews. These notes will be used to complete the K/W/H/L chart in the small groups.

## **OVERT INSTRUCTION**

- 1) The instructor divides the class into groups of four and asks each person and each group to begin making a “K/W/H/L” Chart, which stands roughly for “What they Know/What they Want to Know/How to Research this topic/What they Learned”

The teacher can introduce Oren Lyons by playing a 7-minute interview to the class, which is linked here:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=1&v=bSwmqZ272As&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=1&v=bSwmqZ272As&feature=emb_logo)

- 2) After showing Oren's video, the instructor will ask the class to read the short biography. Using the information in the bio, the students will begin completing their learning graphic organizer charts.
- 3) After about 15 minutes of discussion and chart work, the teacher will show the class one of the longer video interviews that have been pasted above.
- 4) Following the video interview, students will spend 20 minutes answering the following questions in their small groups. Every team member will contribute, with one person recording the information on a separate sheet. This information can also be utilized for the group K/W/H/L chart.

### **Questions**

- a. How did Oren Lyons distinguish himself as an Onondaga Nation member?
  - b. What did Oren Lyons achieve as a leader for his tribal nation, and for environmental advocates around the world?
  - c. Why is Oren Lyons considered to be a legendary leader?
  - d. What types of challenges did Oren Lyons overcome on his path to becoming a world-renowned human rights and environmental advocate?
- 5) Following the small group discussions, each group will report out on their answers, and the answers will be included into a class K/W/H/L chart organized by the instructor on a smartboard or projector.
  - 6) The instructor will open the discussion to include any final thoughts, questions or insights about Oren Lyons and his career and legacy.

### **This concludes the first 50 minutes of the Lesson**

#### **Extension Exercises**

Students who wish to continue their research on Oren Lyons can read his book with John Mohawk, "Exiled in the Land of the Free: Democracy, Indian Nations and the U.S. Constitution," and write an essay where they attempt to answer the following questions:

What are the themes that Oren Lyons focuses on in his work and public speaking?

How has the United State Government been influenced by the Iroquois Confederacy?

Is Oren Lyons part of the Red Power movement? Why or why not?

### **CRITICAL FRAMING**

Oren Lyons has lived through many crises in his life, as he celebrated his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday in the winter of 2020. His influence is felt far and wide as an advocate for justice, and his living legacy continues to thrive from the time it was passed down many generations, and hundreds of years ago. As the Iroquois Confederacy taught the American colonists the natural practice of consensus and self-rule through democratic institutions that balance power, Oren Lyons continues to speak to these themes as a contemporary traditionalist. Like a modern-day Peacemaker, Oren Lyons speaks truth to power as he seeks to balance the forces that are currently usurping our planet and our communities. His role as a leader has never been more relevant in these times of increasing uncertainty and environmental degradation.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

### Oren Lyons Biography

## Biography

Oren R. Lyons is a traditional Faithkeeper of the Turtle Clan, a member of the Onondaga Nation, and *Council of Chiefs* of the Six Nation's of the Iroquois Confederacy, (the Haudenosaunee or "People of the Longhouse").

As a professor, author, publisher, advocate of Indigenous and environmental justice, Lyons works with communities across the globe. As Faithkeeper, he upholds the history and traditions of the Turtle Clan of the Onondaga Nation. Oren often addresses modern-day conflicts by sharing traditional views on the law of nature. When he says "You can't negotiate with a beetle", he implies that nature will respond to climate change whether humans do or not.

Lyons was given the name Joagquisho, "Bright Sun with a Strong Wind" at birth, and grew up on Seneca and Onondaga Nation territories where he was raised with Iroquois traditional ways of thinking, being, and knowing. In 8th grade, he dropped out of school and later became a talented amateur boxer. In 1950, at age 20 he was drafted into the US Army where he continued to excel in boxing. He returned to the reservation in 1953 where he was recruited by the coach of the Syracuse University lacrosse team.

At Syracuse, he was an All-American athlete in lacrosse, a sport he continued playing with club teams for many years after graduating. Oren's athletic career had a jumpstart in his childhood games-- lacrosse is a traditional sport played by the Haudenosaunee, who are originators of the game.

His post-college lacrosse activities helped get him elected to the National Lacrosse Hall of Fame in the US and Canada. He was named 'Man of the Year in Lacrosse' by the NCAA in 1989. Lyons maintains his close connections to lacrosse and continues to be an inspiring role model to both Native and non-Native lacrosse athletes as honorary chairman of the Iroquois Nationals Lacrosse team. Lyons graduated from Syracuse in 1958 with a degree in Fine Arts and then lived and worked as a commercial artist in New York City where he found much success.

In the 1960s, Oren joined what has been dubbed the "Red Power Movement", a group of Native American activists who came together across tribal lines to draw attention to indigenous rights and struggles. Upon reaching his forties, he returned to the land of his birth in upstate New York, and to the cultural heritage of the Onondaga.

In 1970, Lyons returned to his ancestral homeland in upstate New York and to the cultural heritage of his nation. He was later chosen as Faithkeeper of the Onondaga Nation. In this capacity, he is entrusted with keeping alive his people's traditions, values and history. This is when he also began his advocacy work on Indigenous and environmental issues. In addition to his duties as Faithkeeper, Lyons was a professor at SUNY - Buffalo where he directed the Native American Studies program within the



department of American Studies. Lyons also co-founded *Daybreak*, a national Indian newspaper, with John Mohawk, a Seneca teacher and journalist.

As a scholar, he has published many books and articles, including children's books. He edited *Exiled in the Land of the Free*, a 1992 book which made the case for the influence of the ideas and values of the Iroquois Confederacy on American democracy and the designing of the U.S Constitution. He is also the subject of a PBS documentary by Bill Moyers and recently appeared in *Eleventh Hour*, a documentary on the state of the natural world and climate change, produced by Leonardo DiCaprio. He is the author of several books, including "Exiled in the Land of the Free", co-authored with John Mohawk, and has illustrated several children's books.

Now retired from teaching, Oren continues to inspire generations through his leadership in the *Traditional Circle of Indian Elders* and his public speaking. In 2001, Oren addressed the US Department of Energy Tribal Summit with the following words:

*"We now observe that life upon this earth is experiencing a serious imbalance with systemic changes that imperil our lives, the lives of our children, and future generations. The issue of energy is a global problem, and therefore it requires global solutions. We must keep in mind that to meet these issues, we must think beyond our national borders and self-interests. We must bear in mind that the United States is responsible for one quarter of the carbon output that impacts the world. We make a big footprint."*

Oren Lyons actively participates in many national and international forums including the Human Rights Commission of the United Nations. Lyons has received many awards

and honors, including an honorary law degree from Syracuse University, the Ellis Island Congressional Medal of Honor, the National Audubon Society's Audubon Medal for service to the cause of conservation, and the first International Earth Day Award from the United Nations. In 1992, Lyons became the first Indigenous individual to address the U.N. General Assembly. Lyons served on the board of the Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development and has been a Native American representative to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting since 1974.

Throughout the 1970s, Oren took a leadership role in Native American rights events, including the "Trail of Broken Treaties", a caravan that traveled to Washington, DC to confront the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Increasingly focused on traditional practices and native culture, Oren helped convene "The Traditional Circle of Indian Elders", which still meets annually.

Oren's activist work connected him with other indigenous groups around the globe, including the Maori in New Zealand. He helped establish the United Nations working group on indigenous peoples in 1982. In remarks to the UN General Assembly in 1992, Oren highlighted the indigenous peoples' struggle in an era of unrestrained growth. In the speech, he addressed key areas for improvement: the degradation of the environment, US and Canadian treaty violations, and the misuse of Native spiritual sites.

Oren's dedication to the cause of Native and environmental rights has garnered him many accolades, including an honorary degree from his alma mater, Syracuse

University. Institutions including the Rosa Parks Institute for Human Rights, the National Audubon Society, and the Ellis Island Medal of Honor have also recognized Oren's work. Oren Lyons was inducted into the National Native American Hall of Fame in 2019.

## Sources

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<https://www.americanswhotellthetruth.org/portraits/oren-lyons>