Shake a Leg

Boori (Monty) Pryor

*Shake A Leg* is a story which promotes cultural understanding. This innovative picture book follows a group of boys ‘hunting for pizza’ in north Queensland. Their preconceptions are shattered when they enter Bertie’s Pizzeria and are confronted with an indigenous pizza chef who speaks Italian and makes a ‘deadly’ pizza. Over a crocodile-shaped pizza, the chef regales the boys with traditional stories from his culture, and introduces them to the crocodile dance and the honey-bee dance.

The boys are enraptured and eager to learn more, so the chef invites them to meet his family: his daughter, Jemma, who is training to be a nurse, and his sons, Jai, a sound engineer, and Jason, who is mechanically-minded and helps with his father’s business. In an urban twist on tradition, the boys are ‘painted up’ with tomato sauce and flour rather than ochre. They are then taught the exuberant ‘shake-a-leg’ dance, the finale to all the other dances. The dust of the flour and the rhythmic reverberations from the dancers’ feet stirs the spirits of the ancestors: the pizza shop transforms into the *bora* ground, as all take part in the joyous ritual of welcome and acceptance.

The central message of *Shake A Leg* is that that there are stories everywhere, provided people are willing to listen. It is a book about challenging stereotypes, portraying Aboriginal people in modern, culturally diverse environments, not ‘standing on one leg, leaning on a spear, looking for emu’. At the same time, the book emphasises the resilience, richness and integrity of indigenous culture, showing how it maintains its authenticity and unique spirit as Australia changes over time.

*Shake A Leg* is a remarkable storybook collaboration, a unique fusion of two distinct visions – that of Boori Monty Pryor, an influential indigenous author, speaker and performer, and the artist Jan Ormerod, renowned for her soft, tonal paintings, more representative of a ‘European’ illustrative style. In its very nature, then, the book embodies the notion of cooperation and cross-cultural understanding.

Shake the Legs Dance

Rationale: Children learn by using their bodies to explore the world. Through expressive movements, gestures and body shapes children have opportunities to communicate and integrate their knowledge, understandings feelings and thoughts about the world they live in. The skilful manipulation of sound, silence, stillness and movement make dance a powerful art form that transforms the ordinary into something very special.

What you will need:

* Spacious room or open space
* The book *Shake A Leg*
* Wooden clapping sticks – can also clap using hands
* Didgeridoo music
* A4 drawing paper
* black fine liner pens or pencils
* clip boards or thick cardboard to be used as hard surface for drawing
* Red streamers or ribbons

What to do (lesson one):

1. Place a coloured piece of material on floor and gather children together. Ensure that shoes and socks are removed.
2. Introduce the book *Shake A Leg* to the children focusing on the parts of the story that lend themselves to movement exploration e.g. arm and leg gestures, dancing in the dust, crocodiles, snakes, butterflies, bees, stamping, crawling, jumping, group dancing, line dancing, solo dancing.
3. Invite the children one by one to enter the space to make a stationary shape. Use the clapping sticks as accompaniment.
4. Once all children are in the space introduce a full body warm up paying attention to shaking knees, stretching arms up and out, stamping and jumping. Use the clapping sticks as accompaniment. Move to the sound of the sticks. Stop when the sound stops.
5. Experiment with free flow movements that demonstrate elements of the movement material discussed earlier.
6. Sequence three movements such as shake-a-leg, stamping and jumping. Accompany this movement exploration with a didgeridoo CD soundscape and children can be provided with red streamers or ribbons to tie on their wrists.

What to do (lesson two):

1. Introduce the idea of group line dances with half the group dancing and the other half watching from the designated safe space. Begin children at the end of the room moving forwards with stamping. On the loud sound of the clapping stick children stop and perform their shake-a-leg with arms outstretched and end their dance in stillness.
2. Children in the audience are asked to describe what they saw, what did they think about the dance, how did it make them feel? Groups to change over and repeat the sequence.
3. Invite children to create individual / small group dance movements using the movement material already explored in lesson one. Ask for the dancers to begin in stillness and to end in stillness. Talk to the children about choreographic form – a dance has a beginning, middle and end.
4. Gather the children together on the safe space and create a visual image through words - “Imagine that you are out in the Australian desert where there is dry earth under your feet. The sky is huge and blue and you are with your mob. You need to make up a warning dance to tell others about the stinging bee”. Invite all children back into the space for one last ‘Shake-a-Leg’ *Warrima* Dance.

What to do (lesson three):

1. Ask the children to find a place to rest to the sounds of the didgeridoo. While the children are resting distribute the drawing materials to each child. Ask the children to draw something they have remembered about the dance class. Moves around the room and writs the children’s comments on their stories or ask the children write their own sentence. Take the drawings back to the classroom and compile them into a book for further reference.

**Extension:**

Additional classes can follow the same format outlined above. All that is required is for the teacher to select from the following movement content:

* Arm and leg gestures
* Shaking movements of hands, feet and legs put the shaking into knees to create the ‘shake-a-leg’ motif
* Stamping feet, crawling, jumping
* Body shapes in space
* Crocodiles, snake, bee, butterfly movements
* Hunting movements- creeping, spearing
* Individual, small group, whole group dances
* Line dancing - moving forwards and backwards, moving and stillness, sound and silence

Remember that you can support your teaching with:

* Moving body parts – heads, hands, feet, legs, arms, faces, heads, backs, elbows, knees
* Everyday body activities – walking, running, jumping swinging, turning, stretching, spinning, bending
* Dynamic variations - fast/slow, strong, light, smooth, jagged, stillness
* Movements through the space or in place – high, low, forwards, backwards, diagonal,
* Individual dances, small group or whole of group
* Guided imagery
* Props such as ribbons, face paint
* Accompaniment - percussion and CD Rom
* You Tube video footage

Lessons Ideas for K-6

* Discuss who Boori Pryor is.
* Discuss who Jan Ormond is.
* Children work in small groups and invent their own dance to tell the message of the Crocodile Dance and the Honey Bee Dance.
* Analyse pictures. Have students talk about how Jan Ormond makes meaning through her pictures.
* Students create an artwork they think represents the Crocodile Dance or Honey Bee Dance.
* Cook crocodile pizza.
* Make honey bee milkshakes.

Lessons Ideas for 5-6

**Cultural Perceptions & Acceptance**

The students and staff involved in the module of work will have the opportunity for a greater understanding of themselves and a better appreciation of the different cultures that make up their community.

1. Before reading the book, discuss what preconceptions the class has about Aboriginal people. Are there any indigenous students in the class? Do they know anyone personally? (It is vital that these conversations take place in a forum where all students feel safe and validated. If this is a concern, this activity could take the form of a personal reflection or journal entry.)
2. What is your understanding of culture?
3. What do you think defines Australian culture?
4. After reading the book, how have people’s ideas about Aboriginal culture changed?
5. Create a poster designed to promote cultural tolerance or challenge stereotypes.

**Style**

Dialogue is presented in comic-book-style speech bubbles that change during the storytelling, from traditional ovals into irregular, jagged-edged shapes which convey the energy and animation of the dance. By the end of the book, the borders encircling the speech have gone completely and the text sits on the page without demarcation. This reinforces the erosion of the boys’ preconceptions and their inclusion in the world of the bora ground.

Jan Ormerod uses two distinct illustrative styles throughout the text to further this idea of cultures mingling harmoniously. Bold, multi-panelled comic-style illustrations are alternated with more ‘painterly’ double-page spreads. Rich earthy colours are further used to convey key ideas.

The double-page spreads begin when Bertie explains that raising dust when we dance is a way of dancing with our ancestors: [The old people] ‘tell us we’re all family here on earth, dancing with the dust.’ From this point on, the illustrations become larger and freer, as Bertie gets the whole town dancing. The final illustration takes us beyond the town to the infinite stars, the Dreamtime, the togetherness of all people: ‘our arms stretch wide to *warrima*, to shake-a-leg, to welcome you.’

1. Consider the opening double-page spread. What do the enclosed, comic-book style panels convey about urban life? Look at the closing pages. What does the panoramic spread suggest about the power of nature? Consider the end pages. What cultural traditions do the white serpent and the map represent? Where are the heads of the serpent pointing? Why does the illustrator ‘enclose’ the story with these images?
2. How does the use of maps influence our understanding of the book’s themes? Examine the endpapers, title page, and especially the double page spread where Jai paints the boys up.
3. Write and illustrate stories based on the students’ own cultural background. If possible, incorporate some of the illustrative techniques used in *Shake A Leg* e.g. comic-book panels, double page spreads.

**Language**

The language used in the book is strong, simple and colloquial in order to engage readers of all ages. Chants and songs are incorporated, adding rhythmical energy and creating an authentic indigenous voice. Words such as *murri* and *warrima*, examples of an Aboriginal dialect, sit alongside Italian phrases such as *benvenuti*, explicitly foregrounding multiculturalism.

Direct speech is frequently used to create the impression of a spoken voice, highlighting the importance of the oral tradition of storytelling. The conventional narrative opening of the book, ‘Three hungry boys are hunting for pizza’, effectively transforms the reader into the audience of a spoken tale. In this opening line, the humorous juxtaposition of ‘hunting’ and ‘pizza’ signals to the reader that this is a story which will challenge their traditional assumptions about indigenous culture. This motif of the traditional world fusing with the modern underpins the story, evident in such details as the Aboriginal pizza chef, the crocodile-shaped pizza and the tomato sauce body paint.

Students could investigate further sophistication in the text by ‘discovering’ what is not said directly. The honey-bee dance can be seen as a metaphor for the European invasion of Aboriginal land; the crocodile dance is about respecting the instructions of your elders. In his dialogue and stories, Bertie the pizza maker touches on a number of issues that could be contentious but he does so without rancour: the expectation that Aboriginals all live a traditional lifestyle; the invasion of the honey-bee; or the main street of town going over the ancient *bora* ground.

Boori Monty Pryor foregrounds joy, resilience and cultural integrity rather than the damage done – but he doesn’t forget the damage. The entire book implicitly addresses reconciliation and places it in the context of multiculturalism. Furthermore, this text also shows that all individuals have choices to make about engaging with ‘their’ culture and the cultures of others.

**Identity & Diversity**

1. How do you identify yourself within your family and community?
2. Illustrate who you are through art and share with the class as a group.
3. Research culture for its meaning and relevance to Australia today. Discuss outcomes with the class as a group.
4. Have class members talk about their cultural backgrounds. What do they see as unique or distinctive about their culture? What preconceptions or stereotypes do other people have about these cultures? How does it make them feel?
5. Investigate continuities and disjunctions students experience between their personal, family, cultural and social identities. What choices will they make in establishing their own identity?

**Indigenous History and Future**

1. Discuss and draw out any understanding from the class about the Indigenous people of this place and their future here.
2. Using your internet and the library explore the true history of the region or area you live in from an Indigenous perspective.
3. Explore these two people from their roots to their occupations today, and their contributions to the modern world in which they live.

*Barack Hussein Obama* and *Boori Monty Pryor*

Answer the following questions:

* 1. Who is he?
  2. Where does he live?
  3. How does he identify himself?
  4. How is he perceived by the people in the country in which he lives?

**Similarities & Differences**

1. Discuss as a class what is different, and what is the same, despite our diversity of culture within our class and community.
2. Pose the question to the class – are we really that different?