

Lesson Plan: Velvet Mesquite
Saraiya Kanning

“And I say go deep”

Grade Level: 1st-5th

Time Frame: 60 minutes

Objective:

To celebrate velvet mesquite by making art. Students will write a group poem using repetition and illustrate their own special version of a mesquite tree.

Prior Knowledge and Skills:

basic reading and writing skills, though this lesson can be adjusted for a range of ages and capacities

Required Materials:

“Velvet mesquite” by Eric Magrane, reference photos of mesquite trees and mesquite pods, paper and pencil

Sequence of Activities:

Introductions – 10 minutes

If this is a new group of students, the instructor can take special time at the beginning of the session to learn names and hear each child’s voice. The instructor can share about themselves, such as any interesting hobbies or projects they are working on, or perhaps about an activity that brings them great joy. Then ask each child to share their name and describe an activity that makes them happy.

Reading – 10 minutes

Share pictures of mesquite trees with students while explaining that mesquite roots go deeper than any other tree. This helps them survive when there is a drought. The deep roots find water far beneath the earth. Mesquite trees have yellow flowers and long seed pods, which can be crushed and made into flour. And guess what you can do with that flour? Make pancakes!

Read the poem out loud while screensharing the words. Ask students to find phrases that repeat.

Discussion – 10 minutes

Ask students to share the repeating phrases they found. Facilitate a discussion on why they think a poet might repeat phrases. Share that poetry is sometimes like music. In music you have a beat or rhythm, and some words repeat. This makes the words sound interesting to our ears, and we want to say it or sing it out loud over and over again, because the words are saying something important to our hearts.

Students can also be asked to share:

- Words with which they are unfamiliar, and the instructor can help them to understand those words in the context of the poem.
- Aspects of the poem that they enjoyed or that made them curious.
- Their own personal experiences with mesquite trees. (Do you have a mesquite tree in your yard? Who has seen a really *big* mesquite tree? Have you ever climbed a mesquite tree? What else do you know about mesquite trees?)

Collaborative Writing - 20 minutes

Let's write a poem inspired by mesquite trees!

Use the below format to guide the class through a collaborative poem. Ask them to take a silent moment to think about what a mesquite tree might have to say to the world. Ask them to close their eyes and imagine that they are a mesquite tree, that roots are growing from the bottoms of their feet, deep into the earth, searching for water. Imagine the hot desert above, and the cool soil far below, and the creatures in their branches. "Stretch your arms to the side and imagine seed pods dangling from your arms and fingers, your branches." After this moment of meditation, ask them to open their eyes and share what a mesquite has to say:

And I say _____

And I say _____

And I say _____

Allow time for each student to contribute one line to the group poem. If a student gets stuck, consider using the below questions to help inspire ideas:

- What does the mesquite say during a huge monsoon rain?
- What does the mesquite say in the middle of the summer when it hasn't rained for weeks?
- What does the mesquite say to the lizard on its trunk?
- What does the mesquite say to a human?
- What does the mesquite say when a fire comes near?
- What does the mesquite say that is very wise?
- What does the mesquite say that is very funny?
- What does the mesquite say that is very sad?
- What does the mesquite say makes it happy?
- What does the mesquite say makes it sick?
- What does the mesquite say about its deep roots – and where do they go?

Individual Drawing – 10 minutes

If time allows, invite students to draw a mesquite tree. For this activity, allow them to draw from memory and imagination.

Remind them that their drawings can:

- be very realistic or imaginary
- use any colors, even colors that are not actually seen in a real tree (blue trees are okay!)
- include other parts of the tree like the seed pods or the roots underground
- include creatures on or around the tree
- include a background or weather

There are only two rules for this drawing!

- You must draw your own special version of a mesquite tree
- Fill up the page! Let your tree grow from the bottom to the top to the right and to the left, the whole page! That's a big tree.

If time allows, students can share their drawings individually or by holding their drawings up to the screen all at once.

Literary Model:

Velvet mesquite
Prosopis velutina

Eric Magrane

“The mesquite’s root system is the deepest documented; a live root was discovered in a copper mine over 160 feet (50 m) below the surface. Like all known trees, however, 90 percent of mesquite roots are in the upper 3 feet of soil, where most of the water and oxygen are concentrated. The deep roots presumably enable a mesquite to survive severe droughts, but they are not its main life support.”

– from *A Natural History of the Sonoran Desert*

Down here
the layers of earth
are comforting
like blankets.

The soil I think of
as time. Below the caliche
I sift through sediment
from thousands of years.

Though the sharp desert light above
is another world, its pulse
courses through me.

When the mastodons
and ground sloths roamed,
its pulse coursed through me.

When the Hohokam
in the canyon
ground my pods
in the stone
its pulse coursed through me.

When the new gatherers
of the desert
learn again how to live here,
its pulse will course through me.

And I say, I will be ready
if the drought comes.

And I say, go deep
into the Earth.

And I say, go deep
into yourself, go deep
and be ready.

*Reference photos
(consider putting them in a PowerPoint for screensharing)*

