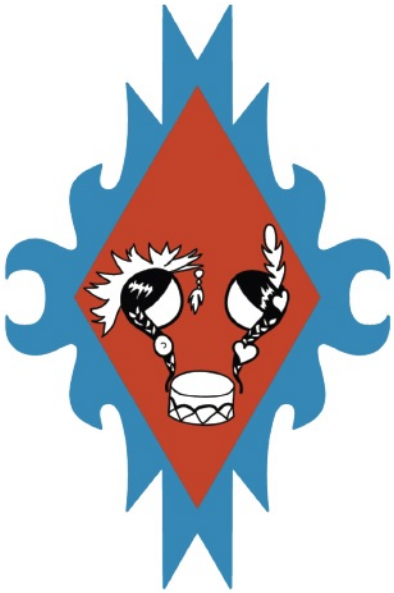
October 2025

The Learning Circle

- *A monthly resource to support Indigenous perspectives in education*



Welcome to the Aboriginal School of Dance Newsletter

The Aboriginal School of Dance is excited to introduce this newsletter as a way to support educators in meaningful and practical ways. Our goal is to create space for teachers to engage in the ongoing process of truth and reconciliation by sharing opportunities, cultural resources, and connections from both the arts and Indigenous communities.

Through these monthly issues, we will highlight inspiring people we've collaborated with, provide safe teaching practices that respectfully involve Indigenous and Native American perspectives, and offer helpful insights into protocols, cultural reconnection, and ways of life. We hope this newsletter becomes a trusted resource—opening doors to new ideas, supporting classroom practice, and keeping you informed about our upcoming programs and specials.

Together, we learn, we share, and we grow stronger in community.

Heartbeat Rhythms: A Classroom Activity

In Indigenous teachings, the drum is more than an instrument, it represents the heartbeat of life. Its steady rhythm is often described as the heartbeat of Mother Earth, reminding us that all living beings are connected.

While schools may not have access to ceremonial drums, teachers can still guide students through a respectful and age-appropriate activity that honors this teaching.

Step 1 – Begin with Story

Read a children's book such as The Heartbeat Drum or show a short video like The Drum Story. Ask: What does the drum sound remind you of? Why do people call it the heartbeat of Mother Earth?

Step 2 – Connect with Their Heartbeat

Have students feel their own heartbeat, then tap it softly on their desks or laps. Share: This is the same rhythm many Indigenous people say lives inside the drum — the rhythm of life.

Step 3 – Group Rhythm Circle

Sit in a circle and tap together in a steady beat: "boom-boom… boom-boom." Encourage students to listen to how the group sounds like one large heartbeat.

Step 4 – Reflechtion

Ask: What did it feel like when we all tapped the same heartbeat? How might a drum carry stories or memories?.

Creative Extension

Students can draw a drum and write one word inside that reflects their feelings (e.g., calm, love, strength). Combine the drawings into a mural called Our Heartbeat Drum.

Why It Matters

This simple activity helps children understand that drums carry spirit, story, and responsibility. It goes beyond music to teach listening, connection, and respect for Indigenous culture.

Teaching with Respect: Understanding the Sacred Drum

An Interview with Buffy Handel

In many classrooms today, educators are searching for meaningful ways to integrate Indigenous knowledge, traditions, and art forms. While the hand drum often appears as a natural choice—an engaging and interactive way to introduce culture—it is vital to understand that drums in Native American and First Nations traditions are not just instruments. They are sacred beings, carrying spirit, energy, and responsibility.

The Spirit of the Drum

"When a drum is created, it is not simply an object," explains Buffy Handel, cultural educator and founder of the Aboriginal School of Dance. "It carries a spirit, what we can also describe as a frequency of energy. Just as all living things vibrate at their own frequency; trees, water, human beings, the drum vibrates too. And when a drum is given a name, it is infused with energy, becoming a medicine that can awaken the warrior inside."

In Indigenous teaching, the "warrior" is not about fighting but about being a seeker and protector of truth. The sound of the drum resonates with what is known as blood memory, a deep inner knowing that connects us to our ancestors, our values, and our higher self.

Vibrational Connections

Handel emphasizes that each drum carries its own unique vibrational connection, born from the materials it is made from.

- The frame comes from the life of a tree. The wood holds its own frequency and must be honored.
- The hide whether deer, moose, elk, or buffalo carries another frequency that intertwines with the tree's.
- The human who plays or holds the drum adds yet another vibrational frequency.

"All of these come together," Handel shares. "Tree, animal, and human, each with their cellular memory. When combined, they create something that speaks to the higher part of who we are."

Feeding and Caring for the Drum

Just as humans require food, water, warmth, and love, so too do drums. In Indigenous culture, it is customary to spiritually feed a drum.

- This may involve offering traditional tobacco (without chemicals),
- Allowing it to feel fire, a sacred element recognized in many world cultures,
- Or at times giving it water, depending on the season.

Leaving a drum unattended in storage—especially over school breaks—would be seen as neglect. "In our teachings, a drum cannot simply be locked away and forgotten," Handel explains. "It needs love, respect, and care. To leave it uncared for is a negative practice."

A Recommendation for Schools

For educators wishing to incorporate drumming respectfully into their classrooms, Handel offers guidance:

- Invite a knowledge keeper, elder, or cultural instructor who can explain the structure and protocols of the drum.
- Allow them to lead the activity and demonstrate how drums are made, so students gain both understanding and skill.
- After the activity, the drums are usually taken back by the instructor or elder, who continues the responsibility of care until one day they may be gifted to a student ready to carry that responsibility with love and respect.

Final Reflection

For both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, the lesson is not only about music but about learning how to respect culture, spirit, and life itself. Drums remind us that all things—tree, animal, human, and fire—are interconnected. By honoring these relationships, schools can move beyond cultural activities to foster true understanding, respect, and responsibility.

October Addition "Music is Medicine"

Reflection Corner

Pause, Breathe, and Reset

Even just a couple of minutes can bring renewal. Try closing your eyes, taking a few deep breaths, or putting on a favorite calming song that helps you feel grounded. These small practices can shift your energy, ease your mind, and create space for inspiration to flow again. Your mental health and well-being matter—not just for you, but for the students who look to you each day. By caring for yourself, you strengthen your ability to lead with calm, focus, and heart.

Take a moment, still and true,

A breath of calm belongs to you.

A song of peace, a gentle start,

Resets the mind, renews the heart.

An Interview with Glory St. Germain

For Glory St. Germain, music isn't simply a subject -it is a language, a lifeline, and a medicine that heals the spirit. Growing up in a musical family, she remembers music being as natural and essential as brushing your teeth. "It wasn't an option," she says. "It was part of our culture. Music feeds your soul, and it is a universal language that connects every culture."

Her husband, the celebrated Métis artist Ray St. Germain, received the Aboriginal Order of Canada for his musical contributions that touched communities nationwide. Together, their lives have been intertwined with the power of music to inspire, to unite, and to heal.

Through her own journey, Glory discovered that understanding the language of music. Music theory was the key to unlocking true self-expression. Yet, like many students, she struggled with the subject at first. "I barely passed," she admits. "Not because I couldn't learn, but because my teacher didn't really know how to teach it." That experience lit a spark. Glory went on to author more than sixty books in music theory, creating resources that would give young musicians the tools she once lacked, essentially seeing a need and filling it!

During the isolation of COVID-19, she saw the impact of this work firsthand. "Students told me, 'Miss Glory, if it wouldn't have been for music, I don't know what I would have done.' Music became their connection, their way to communicate when words fell short."

Out of this calling grew the Ultimate Music Theory Workbook Program and the Ultimate Music Theory Certification Course for Teachers, programs that simplify the learning of theory and make it fun, accessible, and effective. Covering kindergarten through grade 12, the materials are written with all learners in mind: visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and those with special learning needs.

"Music is medicine because it allows us to express what's inside of us… whether through dance, creativity, or simply playing a note," Glory reflects. "And for teachers, the one takeaway is this: simplicity. We've made music theory simple, clear, and fun, so that teachers can feel confident, and students can truly thrive."

Educators can explore free resources at ultimatemusictheory.com, including a masterclass, e-book, and mini-course, or book a free call with Glory to learn how the program can elevate their teaching practice. "This is not a course where you wait two years to see results," she explains. "You're up and running within the first week."

Glory's work also extends into teacher empowerment through her book Teach Music Change Lives: 12 Keys to Unlock the Ultimate Music Teacher Success Strategies, available at TeachMusicChangeLives.com. Along with the book comes a free 60-page companion workbook. "The 12 Keys are designed to help teachers move from passion, to purpose, to profit and it all comes from gratitude and positivity," she says. A portion of proceeds also supports organizations helping musicians, reflecting her deep belief that prosperity enables service.

But for Glory, music as medicine is more than academics or business, it is life itself. She recalls with emotion how her late husband Ray St Germain, even in his final days, was lifted by music. At a public event, frail and wheelchair-bound, he surprised his family. Taking the microphone, he delivered his signature song, "It's Now or Never", with the strength and clarity of a man decades younger, it was truly an emotional experience for everyone present and online. "Music healed him in that moment," Glory shares. Ten days later, Ray passed away, but his legacy of music and healing lives on in the hearts of everyone he touched throughout his career.

That belief in music's healing power is reflected across her family. All five of her children are musicians, and her daughter Sherry, a producer in Las Vegas, composes in healing frequencies. Glory herself has leaned on these vibrations during her own health challenges, experiencing firsthand their restorative energy.

She emphasizes that music must never be dismissed as "extracurricular." "The language of music and dance heals the soul, the body, and the mind. It makes us smarter, improves communication, strengthens math and reading, and most importantly…it connects us."

As she reflects, Glory returns to the truth at the heart of her work: music is medicine. "Can you imagine a world without music? Impossible. We need the vibrations of the hummingbirds, the bumblebees, the songs of the birds at dawn. Music is life."

Did You Know?

Northern Cree

The legendary Northern Cree Singers, founded in the 1980s in Alberta, have been nominated for nine Grammy Awards and multiple JUNO Awards. Their music has been featured in major films like Grey Owl and on the FIFA 2010 World Cup soundtrack. They are known for blending traditional Cree round dance songs with contemporary powwow styles — reminding the world that the heartbeat of the drum carries across generations.

Black Lodge Singers

Formed by the Scabby Robe family from the Blackfeet Nation in Montana, the Black Lodge Singers are one of the most recognized drum groups in North America. They gained fame not only for their championship powwow songs but also for their "Kids' Powwow Songs" albums, which feature playful renditions like "Barney Song" and "SpongeBob SquarePants Song." These songs made Indigenous music fun, accessible, and joyful for children everywhere.

Young Spirit

Hailing from Frog Lake Cree Nation, Alberta, Young Spirit is known for bringing youthful energy and vocal intensity to the powwow trail. Their performance at the 2017 Grammy Awards Premiere Ceremony marked a historic moment for Indigenous drumming on an international stage. Their music celebrates language revitalization and the pride of Indigenous identity through original Cree lyrics and high-energy rhythms.

Blackstone Singers

Originating from the Cree community of Kisipatnahk (Samson Cree Nation) in Alberta, Blackstone Singers are celebrated for their powerful high-pitched vocals and signature northern-style songs. They have recorded over 25 albums and continue to be a leading force in the powwow circuit. Their message is simple yet profound: when you sing with heart, you connect spirit, land, and people.

Worksheet: Exploring the First Drum Stories

This worksheet is designed for teachers to use while researching stories about the first Native American or First Nations drum. The goal is to recognize the diversity of cultural teachings and reflect on their meanings. As you find each story, record the details below.

Story Title / Source	Nation / Tribe	Main Teaching or Lesson	Elements (Tree, Animal, Spirit, etc.)	Reflections / Notes

Reflection Questions: 1. How many different "first drum" stories did you find? 2. What similarities appeared across different Nations' stories? 3. What unique teachings did you discover? 4. How does this exercise change your perspective on teaching Indigenous culture?

Drum Trivia!

1) What does the drum's heartbeat represent in many Indigenous cultures?

Answer: The heartbeat of our mother Earth.

2) What do we call the group of singers and drummers who sit around the big drum?

Answer: A drum group.

3) What two materials are most hand drums traditionally made from?

Answer: Animal hide and wood.

4) What gives the drum its spirit or voice?

Answer: The animal hide.

5) What does drumming teach us about music and movement?

Answer: That rhythm and movement create harmony and connection.