

RILEY YESNO



A CONVERSATION ON GENDER, COMMUNITY, AND COLONIALISM

Recommended for grades 7+



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Riley Yesno (she/her) is a queer Anishinaabe scholar, writer, and advocate from Eabametoong First Nation. She has been a contributor and commentator for some of the largest media outlets in Canada and the world including the New York Times, BBC World News, The Globe and Mail, and CBC National News. Riley has also travelled the globe speaking at internationally renowned institutions and events including the UN climate negotiations, the Stockholm Forum on Gender Equality, TEDx stages, and many others.

This lesson plan is organized into three key themes: (1) gender and pre-colonial gender norms, (2) personal responsibility vs. community responsibility, and (3) youth voices and power. Riley's talk follows this same progression, with each section including discussion questions connected to the theme.

Throughout Riley's talk, students are encouraged to identify new or challenging terms and work together to build a shared class glossary at the end. The lesson concludes with an art project that connects to the theme of youth voice and empowerment, inviting students to reflect on their own power to create change.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITY



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Riley speaks about gender as something that was understood in more diverse and balanced ways within many Indigenous cultures prior to colonization. She explains how colonial systems imposed rigid, binary ideas of gender that disrupted and attempted to erase Indigenous knowledge, including the roles and identities of Two-Spirit and gender-diverse people. She reflects on the lasting impacts of residential schools, which enforced these norms and caused deep harm to individuals and communities. As part of her work today, Riley is committed to reclaiming and uplifting LGBTQ2+ identities, supporting the revitalization of traditional teachings, and creating space for all people to live fully and authentically.

What is a gender norm? What are some gender norms you might see in society?

Many Indigenous Nations recognized more than two genders and had specific roles and responsibilities for people we might now understand as Two-Spirit. Why do you think these roles were important in community life?

How might a community benefit when people are free to express their identity and gifts without strict gender expectations?

How did colonization (including residential schools and imposed laws) change or limit traditional Indigenous understandings of gender?

Why do you think colonial systems emphasized strict gender roles (male/female)?

What impacts might this have had on individuals, families, and communities?

How can learning about Indigenous perspectives on gender help create more respectful and inclusive communities today?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITY



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Riley speaks about how, in many precolonial Indigenous societies, the focus was not on individual rights but on shared responsibilities. This meant that instead of one person being entitled to something, the whole community held a responsibility to care for one another. For example, rather than having a “right” to food, everyone shared the responsibility to ensure that all members of the community were fed.

How is this way of thinking different from how responsibility and rights are understood in Western society today?

Can you think of other examples where this idea of shared responsibility might apply?

If students are struggling below is a list of examples and areas to guide them to.

In your classroom or school:

- Making sure everyone feels safe, included, and respected
- Standing up when you witness bullying or harmful behaviour
- Supporting classmates who may be struggling with schoolwork or mental health
- Sharing materials, knowledge, or time so everyone can succeed
- Taking care of shared spaces like classrooms, hallways, and outdoor areas

Across Canada and in broader society:

- Ensuring all communities have access to clean drinking water
- Supporting the safety and justice of Indigenous women, girls, and Two-Spirit people (MMIWG2S+)
- Honouring and protecting Indigenous lands, waters, and treaty responsibilities
- Addressing inequities in housing, healthcare, and education for Indigenous communities
- Revitalizing and respecting Indigenous languages, cultures, and knowledge systems

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITY



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Riley explores the connections between Indigenous rights and environmental protection, emphasizing that these issues are deeply interconnected. She highlights examples like development in the Ring of Fire, raising questions about land, responsibility, and who gets to make decisions. She also speaks to the deep traditional ecological knowledge held by Indigenous Peoples and how this knowledge is essential in leading efforts to care for the Earth.

Reflecting on her own experiences as a young changemaker, Riley shares that she often felt her voice was unheard. Over time, she came to understand that change doesn't only happen through formal systems like politics—power is not just about having a seat at the table, but how you use your voice and actions to create impact wherever you are.

Riley leaves us with a message of hope, grounded in the strength and leadership of youth today. She encourages people to see young people not just as learners, but as mentors—reminding us that everyone can learn from youth voices and perspectives.

- Riley speaks about the connection between Indigenous rights and environmental protection. Why do you think these issues are linked, and what responsibilities come with caring for the land?
- What is traditional ecological knowledge, and why is it important to listen to Indigenous voices when making decisions about the environment?
- Riley shares that she felt unheard as a young person. Why do you think youth voices are sometimes overlooked, and how can we create spaces where young people are truly listened to?
- Riley says that power isn't just about having a seat at the table, but how you use it. What does this mean to you? Can you think of ways people can create change without formal positions of power?
- Riley encourages everyone to have a youth mentor. What might you learn from someone younger than you, and how can listening to youth perspectives help build a better future?

Design your own poster below. Pick key issues that you are passionate about - they can be issues from around the world or issues in your own community. We want to know what you want changed. We want to hear your voice.



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