

AWARENESS: RECOGNIZING THE NATIVE PERSPECTIVE

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INTENDED GRADE LEVEL/SUBJECT AREA

Grade 11 Social Studies, English

CONCEPTS

- First Nations' culture, spirituality and history from the Social Studies curriculum
- imperialism, global diversity, quality of life from the English curriculum
- writing, reading/literature, viewing, listening and speaking from the Information Literacy skills list
- database searching, locating and retrieving information, critical analysis of information, appreciation of knowledge and culture

INSTRUCTIONAL OUTCOMES

In addition to meeting the requirements of the English 20 (and Advanced Placement) English curricula and the Social Studies 20 Topic A—Global Perspective, the students:

- developed an awareness of native spirituality, Native relationship to the land, Native culture, Native history, the stereotypes of Natives (in order to deconstruct and demythologize);
- investigated literature by and about Natives, issues that are of present day concern to Natives (self-government, land claims, justice, women's issues, youth issues, residential schools), Native stereotypes as depicted in our culture (print media, literature, film), Native voices (art, stories, music, film, dance);
- participated in developing unit and daily lesson plans, traditional Native customs and ceremonies (round dance, sweetgrass ceremony, sweatlodge ceremony, thanksgiving);
- visited the following sites: Poundmaker Lodge (St.Albert-Cree); Nechi Institute (St.Albert-Cree), Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump (Fort McLeod-Peigan and Blood); Tsuu T'ina Nation (Sarcee Reserve), Native Friendship Centre (Edmonton-inner-city), Bissell Centre (Edmonton-inner-city);
- developed an understanding of: the Native way of life (history), issues that Natives face today, the importance of language/culture/spirituality to Natives;
- developed the following: reading, speaking, viewing, writing, listening skills (as per the English curriculum), process, communication, participation skills and inquiry strategies (as per Social Studies curriculum); formal research and database searching skills (major resource: The Legacy Project CD-ROM) through preparing a writing portfolio, a guided response journal, a formal composition, and a creative project.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

How do white teachers in a predominantly white urban high school introduce and sensitize students to Native history, literature and cultural issues? With the guidance of Native advisors, elders and counselors, we joined our students on an interdisciplinary journey,

rejecting traditional white pedagogy in favour of a process that required us to look, listen and ask from the heart. We explored Native issues through the disciplines of Social Studies (Wally), English (Gail) and Information and Computer Literacy (Kaye). We were fortunate to have Nardo Saddleback, a recent graduate of our school, Bellerose Composite High School, act as Native advisor throughout the planning and implementation of this unit.

Our school has 800 students, most of whom are white, and who, for the most part, share an upper middle class socio-economic background. We have very few visible minorities, and students have very few opportunities to participate in cross-cultural activities. While suitable for any level of high school Humanities studies, our unit involved two classes of Social Studies 20 and Advanced Placement English 20, thus including students with varying degrees of academic ability.

While we had taught this native awareness unit in previous years, we were motivated to revise and enhance it to take advantage of an invitation from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) to participate in piloting the integration of the ReCAP Legacy Project CD-ROM into the regular curriculum. The CD-ROM by Libraxis Inc., using the powerful FolioViews software, was developed to provide excellent access to the huge quantity of data resulting from the Royal Commission On Aboriginal Peoples, initiated by the Mulroney government after the failure of the Meech Lake Accord in 1992. The Commission's mandate was to "examine almost every aspect of the experience of aboriginal people and their relations with Canadian society at large." The 2000+ submissions and relevant legislation were compiled in a CD-ROM database, with unit plans integrating the resource from the pilot schools added. A final copy of the CD-ROM was launched in Ottawa in November 1996.

MAIN IDEAS

On this planet there is no bigger question than 'how do we develop an understanding of other cultures and teach them about ourselves?' Through looking and listening, we recognized stereotypes and myths constructed around First Nations peoples, and slowly began the process of deconstructing ideologies that have shaped conventional views of history.

ACTIVITIES

Introduction

Our odyssey began in a circle of thanksgiving and gift-giving on the school grounds. Alan White, a counselor/educator from the nearby Nechi Institute, presented us with the powerful gift of a sweetgrass ceremony, during which each student received a response journal for personal observations.

Development

With our return to the classroom came the admission by students and teachers that we all construct stereotypes. We examined print media, Hollywood film, literature and archival photographs to look for clues as to where such myths begin. These initial preparations and observations shaped the journey—imaginative, spiritual, historical, geographical—that was to follow.

Our physical journey, a weekend spent living traditionally on the Tsuu T'ina Reserve and visiting Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump, was exhausting, invigorating, transfiguring. We were treated as guests, rather than tourists on Tsuu T'ina land. Our Native hosts' respect for us, for each other, for Mother Earth was contagious. Students began shyly, but soon were active participants in the camp: erecting tipis, dancing, telling stories, singing, drumming.

Elders at Head-Smashed-In told us stories, taught us to dance and laugh, although it took us a while to let go of our "whiteness" and give ourselves permission to engage in the process. Author Shirley Bruised-Head read from her own work. We saw, first hand, that not all natives are one nation; there are differences and prejudices between them. But we also saw a community of different peoples, trying to learn to live together, save their own and our world, and teach others willing to listen. For a transformative weekend we saw the power of cooperative learning so central to Native teaching; we witnessed the power of story.

Upon our return, the journey as metaphor continued. A number of guest speakers, including Michael Merrier and Laura Vinson of Ben Calf Robe School, spoke to our students about Native spirituality and the realities of urban life for Native peoples. While continuing to write daily in their personal response journals, students undertook their independent research activity, and were asked to share their new insights and knowledge through any medium—writing, painting, video, photography, etc.

Conclusion

The unit culminated in a sweatlodge ceremony, conducted for our students by Alan White and Tony Calahoo from the Nechi Institute and in a final thanksgiving dinner for one hundred people, organized, prepared and emceed by the students themselves. Completing the circle, we were joined by parents, other school staff members, our hosts from Tsuu T'ina, and our friends from the Nechi Institute in a wonderful evening of sharing, celebration, song, dance and gift-giving.

EVALUATION

Students were required to explore the importance of the journey through any medium—writing, painting, video, photography, etc. Final projects were shared with other students and were displayed during our final celebration. Student portfolios formed the basis for assessment, and included the following activities:

1. Research an issue.
2. Select and respond to one theme or question raised in the Native literature studied that you would like to explore further.
3. Respond to the question: To what extent was the Native experience with the Europeans an example of colonization?
 - a. Personal Response Journals
 - b. Student and Teacher assessment of Unit Feedback to the OISE research group about the integration of The Legacy Project CD-ROM.

RESOURCES/MATERIALS

The unit and lesson plans can easily be adapted to other provincial curricula. Teachers should make use of local speakers, Native communities, and historical and geographic sites

in their own backyards. Fundraising was a necessary component of this unit. Students paid \$50 each to participate in the Tsuu T'ina trip and additional monies were raised through recycling drives, a wake-a-thon, and through sponsorship from individuals dedicated to raising awareness of Native issues.

- Human resources—speakers from the First Nations' community on Native issues, literature, culture;
- Personal response journals (scribblers with Native artwork glued to the covers);
- A wide variety of print, media, and electronic resources, including the ReCAP Legacy Project CD-ROM;
- Field experiences such as visits to Native communities (both traditional and contemporary, reserve and inner city, institutions and individuals);
- Materials and equipment to enable students to produce a wide variety of creative products to share their knowledge and perspectives.

About the Educators

Wally Diefenthaler, Gail Sobat and Kaye Steward team-teach Native Awareness at Bellerose Composite High School in St. Albert, Alberta. The group developed a Canadian history interdisciplinary unit called The Legacy Project that combines a resource-based approach with experiential learning. This six-week project involves students in a series of theme-related days that culminate in a 3-day stay at the Tsuu T'ina Reserve near Calgary. At the reserve, the Tsuu T'ina youth and elders introduce students to traditional Native customs and challenge them to investigate Native stereotypes. The Legacy Project has received much recognition.