

# **GOLD RUSH: THE POWER OF STORYTELLING**

Judi Gelowitz, British Columbia

## **INTENDED GRADE LEVEL/SUBJECT AREA**

Kindergarten through University History, Social Studies, Language Arts, The Arts

## **CONCEPTS**

- Local history, geography, research, storytelling and drama as vehicles for exploring historical events.

## **INSTRUCTIONAL OUTCOMES**

Students will:

- appreciate historical events through listening to relevant stories;
- use creative writing for the purpose of recounting historical events;
- recreate historical events through dramatization;
- demonstrate an understanding of the effect that the discovery of gold had on the economic and cultural development of the early Canadian west;
- demonstrate an understanding of how opposing forces shape culture and history.

## **RECOMMENDED TIME FRAME**

Throughout the school year

## **BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

Dr. Kieran Egan has written about many topics on education. His books *Teaching As Story Telling* and *Primary Understanding*, have greatly influenced the following outline. Dr. Egan has created a Story Form Model that acts as a framework for planning effective storytelling. Teachers can apply this strategy in the planning of a lesson or unit. As well, students can use this model in planning their own historical writing or dramatization.

### **The Story Form Model**

1. **Identifying Importance**  
What is most important about this topic? Why would it matter to children?  
What is affectively engaging about it?
2. **Finding Binary Opposites**  
What powerful binary opposites best catch the importance of the topic?
3. **Organizing Content into Story Form**  
Which content most dramatically embodies the binary opposites, in order to provide access to the topic?

4. Conclusion

What is the best way of resolving the dramatic conflict inherent in the binary opposites? What degree of mediation of those opposites is appropriate to seek?

5. Evaluation

How can one know whether the topic has been understood, its importance grasped, and content learned?

## ACTIVITY

I used Dr. Egan's model to plan and implement a unit on the Cariboo Gold Rush of British Columbia for my grade 5 class.

### Identifying Importance:

When considering the historical importance of the gold rush in British Columbia, one of the first things to come to mind is its impact on the economic development of the province. Secondary to that, is the development of law enforcement, gun controls, homesteading opportunities, mining, forestry, ranching and transportation routes.

Listening to the stories that emerged from that period can help students obtain a more personal understanding of its relevance to their lives. I believe that all children love stories of adventure and romance. Good storytelling and great literature can enable them to envision the heroic moments and tragic times of this era. The powerful lure of gold and its promise of wealth, for example, is the stuff that good stories are made of!

### Finding Binary Opposites:

The opposing forces which immediately come to mind when examining the Gold Rush period, are the lure of gold, the dream of immeasurable wealth and, conversely, the hardships endured by those who were seduced by the dream. Many had to make difficult decisions before setting out. Leaving families, abandoning their homes, suffering the gruelling, mountainous trails into the gold fields, facing back-breaking work in the harshest of climates, and often risking life savings, were just some of the obstacles which had to be surmounted by "those who toiled for gold." Always present, was the conflict between the aboriginal people and the new arrivals.

### Organizing Content into Story Form:

With the help of a teacher-librarian, I have re-enacted the following scene for my students in order to introduce them to the Gold Rush:

A group of men hear about gold being discovered in New Caledonia. They have been out of work since the California Gold Rush ten years earlier and are still captivated by the thought of striking it rich. The protagonists are two gold panners who see the conditions they are faced with from two opposing perspectives. One is an optimist and the other, a pessimist. The ensuing dialogue illustrates the complex and paradoxical nature of their search for gold.

The Cariboo Gold Rush paralleled the development of the Cariboo Road, the arrival of the Royal Engineers and the stories of Judge Begbie and the many settlers who stayed in British Columbia after the first rush of gold-frenzied enthusiasts departed. It also precipitated the building of the railway across Canada. These monumental events, coupled with the colourful characters who influenced and, were influenced by them, make developing the story form simple. The result is that students become skilled storytellers and historians.

## CONCLUSION

The need for law and order was foremost in the minds of those trying to govern this area. The arrival of the Royal Engineers and Judge Begbie were important events that helped resolve many of the conflicts that were presenting themselves to the miners and to the aboriginal people. Weapon laws were enforced, acreage for settlers was encouraged and options for alternate jobs were offered. The colony became a part of Canada. The natural resource industry was born.

## EVALUATION

Through group activities, role-playing opportunities, journal writing, story writing, art and music projects, the students' understanding can be evaluated. One of the most powerful ways my students demonstrate their understanding of the material studied is during our extended field study to the historic town of Barkerville. Seeing them play the characters in the Gold Rush streets is a very rewarding experience. Observing them as they work with the street theatre performers, and enjoy the rich learning experience that surrounds them, provides an opportune moment for reflection and evaluation.

As storytelling is a far-reaching strategy, and one that is used in classrooms in a great variety of ways, assessment is difficult to address. In general, appreciation and understanding are not always measurable. Each use of this strategy could have varying criteria that is evaluative. Younger students could be asked to categorize pictures or words that represented the positive or negative aspects of a story. Intermediate and high school students could examine and present the development of stories using the story form model. Rubrics could be co-created with students as a means for self and peer evaluation of stories or dramatizations.

The planning of a year-long study of Canada and in particular of British Columbia's past has become more workable as a result of this meaningful format. I believe that by using the story form model for planning and presenting materials, history has become more accessible to me and to my students.

## RESOURCES

- Barkhouse, Joyce. (1990). *Pit Pony*. Toronto: Educational Publishing Company.
- Berton, Pierre. (1992). *City of Gold: Adventures in Canadian History*. Toronto: The Canadian Publishers.
- Egan, Kieran. (1988). *Primary Understanding: Education in Early Childhood*. London: Routledge.

- Egan, Kieran. (1987). *Teaching as Story Telling: An Alternative Approach to Teaching and Curriculum in the Elementary School*. London: Althouse Press.
- Greenwood, Barbara. (1994). *A Pioneer Story: The Daily Life of a Canadian Family in 1840*. Toronto: Kid Can Press Limited.
- Identity Social Studies Series. *Canada: Building Our Nation*. Scarborough, Ontario: Prentice- Hall Canada Inc.
- Langston, Laure. (1995). *Pay Dirt! The Search for Gold in British Columbia*. Victoria: Orca Book Publishers.
- Walsh, Ann. (1998). *Winds Through Time*. Vancouver: Beach Holme Publishing.

### About the Educator

Judi Gelowitz has been taking her grade 5/6 students to the Historic Gold Rush town of Barkerville for thirteen years. The five-day visit is the culmination of her students' historic study of British Columbia. The students dress in period costumes, participate in a mock trial, attend a Victorian school day, become apprentices in a leather workshop and fine-tune their gold panning skills. Throughout the trip they are 'living' their year-long integrated studies. The intent is to instill within the children a love of history. Their studies include the investigation of social, environmental and economic issues. They are immersed in storytelling activities that enable them to experience the lives of many Canadian historical characters and events.

For six years, Judi has taught the Social Studies Method course at the University College of the Cariboo, with a major emphasis on Canadian history. She conducts in-services for district staff on a regular basis. She has been very involved with the Kamloops Provincial Heritage Fairs and attended the National Heritage Fair in PEI. Her class took part in the creation of a Heritage Minute. Judi's recent Masters of Education paper was entitled, *The Heartbeat of a Ghost Town: An Integrated Curriculum*.