

THE TRIAL OF LOUIS RIEL: HONING LOGIC AND REASONING

Michael Taylor, Ontario

INTENDED GRADE/SUBJECT AREA

Grades 8 and 9 History, Language Arts, Drama

CONCEPTS

- The Riel Rebellions, Government, Law, Mental Health, Historical Fiction, Script Writing, Mock Trials

INSTRUCTIONAL OUTCOMES

Students will:

- develop research skills;
- read and present information on Confederation, western development 1860-1900 and the Riel Rebellions;
- apply critical thinking skills to make inferences and analyses;
- acquire an understanding of the nature of mental illness;
- write a research essay using footnotes and bibliographic information;
- work creatively with group members to write a script;
- rehearse and present a dramatic trial.

RECOMMENDED TIME FRAME

This integrated unit requires many weeks to complete and is normally found in the final term. The seminars are 80 minutes, with groups of about eight students.

Research activities and discussions on law and psychoses and neuroses are about eight periods of 40 minutes each. The simulated trials are about 80 to 120 minutes each. There is a one-day excursion to the Ontario courts.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The students have previously developed all of the research skills necessary to carry these lessons out. This unit offers them the opportunity to demonstrate a higher achievement level, based on their earlier experiences.

ACTIVITIES

Part One — Research and Seminar

The students are provided with a research outline to begin their work. In-class activities involve a small group seminar approach, using *Horizons Canada*, *The Beaver* and various other texts. The students continue research outside of the class. This information-gathering culminates in 80-minute small group seminars. The students are expected to support their inferences and analysis with specific facts.

Part Two — Neuroses, Psychoses and Law

An understanding of Louis Riel requires an examination of the nature of mental

illness. The students use current information and receive lectures on this area. They have an expository writing assignment that requires a diagnosis of Riel. Two guest lecturers from law school provide insight into trial procedures. A series of mock trials allow the students to perfect appropriate questioning and objection techniques.

Part Three — Collaborative, Historical Fiction, Script Writing

In groups of five or six, students plan the re-creation of Louis Riel's trial, as if it were to be held today and all the witnesses (e.g., Gabriel Dumont) can be called. Each student is required to write the complete testimony of at least two witnesses for the crown or defense. Evaluation is based on systematic logic and on the creative use of information. These scripts are discussed, improved and evaluated again. When they are combined with others in the group, they should create a well-balanced trial that will require serious discussion from the jury.

Part Four — The Trial of Louis Riel

Students gather at school and at home to learn their roles. They are encouraged to include one lengthy weekend rehearsal. They gather their costumes and exhibits. Witnesses are expected to memorize their testimony. Presentations are to be made in character. The teacher acts as judge to rule on objections (from the script). A jury of grade 7 students is formed to listen and reach a decision. Evaluation focuses on dramatic skills.

MATERIALS/RESOURCES

- Current and dated information on all topics
- Guest speakers for expert legal advice from law students or lawyers.
- Visit to the Ontario Courts, criminal division.

About the Educator

Michael J. Taylor is a playwright, director and grade 7/8 teacher. He has co-written, directed and produced two Canadian historical musical productions. *Radishes and Gooseberries* deals with the explorers Radisson and Groseilliers. *Too Late to Stop Now* features the Upper Canada 1837 Rebellion. Michael and his students and colleagues spent eight months producing and rehearsing to take the plays on a 12-presentation tour. Other examples of live and taped productions include *Klondike*, a musical comedy that celebrates the 100th anniversary of the gold strike and a grade 8 class re-enactment of the trial of Louis Riel.

In preparation for the plays, Michael involves his students in extensive research into the history of the period. He also arranges numerous historical excursions for his students. Michael's students won the 1998 CBC Greatest Events in Canadian History competition for "Most Innovative" with their video on immigration from 1800 to 1990. Michael stresses academic challenges that require the use of inference and analysis. Assignments in historical fiction and expository writing develop these skills. His experimental assignments act as the hook to stimulate students to become involved in history education.